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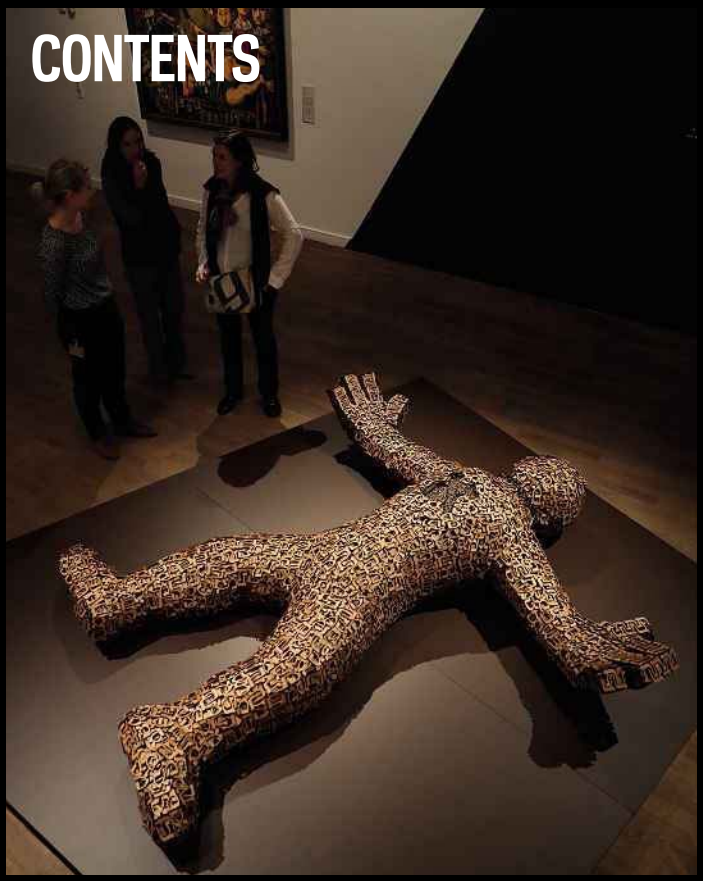

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Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

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EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

SEASON OF THE WITCH

Welcome to our Hallowe'en issue, full of suitably seasonal tricks and treats to provide a fortean frisson as the nights draw in. Our theme is witchcraft, viewed from a number of different and hopefully refreshing perspectives. Roger Clarke, in the first instalment of a two-part feature, takes a close look at one of the most famous cases in the supernatural annals of the USA – the Bell Witch of Tennessee. But was she a witch, a poltergeist or a folkloric expression of the darker currents of American history?

Closer to home, Robert Halliday examines some of the most fascinating tangible artefacts of British folk belief in his survey of Bellarmine witch bottles – earthenware jugs filled with nail clippings, needles and urine to ward off the maleficent designs of those thought to be witches. Although these jugs, bearing Wildman-like hairy faces, were of German manufacture, their use as anti-witchcraft agents would appear to be unique to England: they've been dug up from Greenwich to Norwich, but no similar finds have been made on mainland Europe.

There are references to witch bottles in the English witch trials of the 17th century, but Dr Jacob Middleton in his article on the 'Twilight of the Witches' asks whether such practices, and the patterns of belief underlying them, persisted for far longer than is generally thought. Witchcraft-related murders dating from as recently as 1875 suggest that industrialisation and changes to the legal system had made surprisingly few inroads into the darker aspects of rural life in the Victorian era, and that magic was still alive and well among the hamlets and hedgerows of the British countryside.

"Still riding that old thing, eh?"

WITCHES AGAINST TRUMP

Witchcraft is also alive and well on the streets of 21st century Los Angeles and New York according to recent news reports. Tinseltown witch Vicky Adams, who runs an LA occult store, claims that fellow practitioners from all over the world have been joining forces each month to cast a mass binding spell on President Trump to prevent him from unleashing "harm and destruction" on the planet. Apparently, the spell takes place "every waning Moon, once a month... There are probably tens of thousands of witches who take part – it's hard to know exactly – but certainly a great amount of witches are coming together every month to do this spell." Ms Adams sees these global spell castings as following in the tradition of Dion Fortune's magical defence of Britain during 1940 (see "The Magical Battle of Britain", **FT267:34-41**), and advises that all you need to cast the spell is the Tower card from a Tarot deck, an unflattering photo of Trump, an orange candle, some sage and a feather. The next binding takes place on 17 October 2017. *thesun.co.uk, 7 Sept 2017.*

ERRATA

FT355:56-57: A footnote was missing from the end of Jenny Randles's article "Death and the Borders of Reality". The online forum she refers to is: Allnurses.com, subsection Hospice Nursing, thread 'Death Stories'.

FT356:80: The report of a pastor eaten by crocodiles in Zimbabwe last May is apparently fake news. *<i> 16 May 2017.*

FT357:24: In Peter Brookesmith's Flying Sorcery column the reference to "Messrs Halt, Burroughs and Pendleton" should have read "Halt, Burroughs and Penniston".

DAVID R SUTTON

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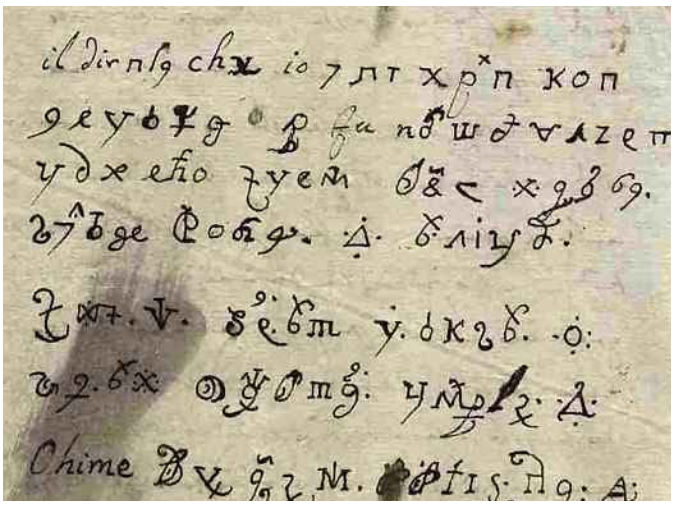
STRANGE DAYS

‘LETTER FROM LUCIFER’ DECODED

A letter written by a possessed 17th century nun is finally translated – and yields a devilish message

A “letter from Lucifer” written by a 17th century Sicilian nun has finally been translated. The coded letter was written by Maria Crocifissa della Concezione at the Palma di Montechiaro convent in 1676. Some 340 years later, computer scientists at the Ludum Science Centre in Catania, Sicily, have unscrambled the code using a code-cracking algorithm they found on the dark web. “We heard about the software, which we believe is used by intelligence services for codebreaking,”’ said Daniele Abate, director of the centre. “We primed the software with ancient Greek, Arabic, the Runic alphabet and Latin to de-scramble some of the letter.” The team found it does indeed carry a devilish message: it describes God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit as “dead weights”, and states sarcastically: “God thinks he can free mortals… The system works for no one”. It also says God and Zoroaster were invented by man, adding: “Perhaps now, Styx is certain”, referring to the River Styx that separates the netherworld from the land of the living in Classical mythology.

Sister Maria was born Isabella Tomasi in 1645, but was rechristened once she entered the Benedictine convent at Palma di Montechiaro aged 15. She was an ancestor of the Italian writer Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. On the morning of 11 August 1676, she was found on the floor of her cell, her face covered in ink, holding a note written in an incomprehensible mixture of symbols and letters. She told her sisters she had been



possessed by Satan and that he had forced her to write a message in an attempt to turn her away from God. The nuns believed her, and while they – and the generations of nuns who came after them – could make no sense of the code, they displayed it at the convent. For the Church, the letter was considered the outcome of Sister Maria’s struggle against “innumerable evil spirits”, according to an account written by Abbess Maria Serafica shortly after the incident. Serafica believed the Devil had forced Sister Maria (who was later blessed) to sign the letter, and that she heroically opposed the demand by writing, “Ohimé” (oh me), which is the only comprehensible word in the letter. Many people have tried to decode the rest of it over the years, but no one has succeeded until now.

Sister Maria had become very adept at linguistics during her years in the convent, and is said to have screamed, fought against Satan and fainted while writing letters. The only surviving letter, the one described here, appeared to be written in a language of her own invention – a mishmash of the alphabets she had come to know. Assuming this to be the case, the scientists loaded the software with any language she might have come across: Latin, ancient Runic, Greek, modern Greek and even that of the Yazidi people. By identifying characters in the letter similar to those of the alphabets that Sister Maria would have known, the team started making sense of her words. They translated 15 lines of the letter and found that it discusses the relationship between humans, God and Satan. It is rambling and not entirely consistent and understandable. Conforming to contemporary orthodoxy, Daniele Abate believes that, rather than being possessed by the Devil, Sister Maria suffered from schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. *Times, 7 Sept; dailymail.co.uk, 8 Sept; livescience.com, 18 Sept 2017.*

VOYNICH HYPOTHESIS

Writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Nicholas Gibbs, an expert on mediæval medical manuscripts, has a novel insight into the celebrated Voynich manuscript, carbon-dated to 1404-38 and now held in Yale’s Beinecke Library. The enigmatic document features in the *Indiana Jones* novels and the latest hit computer game *Assassin’s Creed*. It is full of illustrations of exotic plants, stars, and mysterious human figures, as well as many pages written in an unknown script [see **FT130:42-46, 260:58-59, 345:38-43**]. Gibbs claims the text is written in Latin ligatures – “developed as scriptorial short cuts” – outlining remedies from standard medical information. He believes each character represents an abbreviated word, not a letter, and that the document is a health manual for a well-to-do lady looking to treat gynæcological conditions. (Admittedly, Prof Leonell Strong back in 1945 thought it discussed herbal contraceptives and women’s ailments.) The images of bathing women and healing plants suggested it referred to aromatherapy, practised by Hippocrates and Pliny the Elder. However, Gibbs is still unable to fully translate the recipes. The main issue, he says, is that the manuscript is missing its indexes. “For the sake of brevity,” he writes, “the name of both plant and malaise were superfluous in the text so long as they could be found in the indexes matched with a page number.” *D. Mail online, 7 Sept 2017.*

PHI POB RETURNS

Vengeful female spirit terrorises Thai policemen

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CELEBRITY SCARES

Claudia Schiffer and her ghostly houseguests

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CUBANACAN IN COLOUR

Long-lost litigon photo is rediscovered

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THE CONSPIRASPHERE

As the end of the world show rumbles on, NOEL ROONEY bags a front row seat to enjoy the latest round of apocalyptic doom-mongering...

SAVE THE DATE

"Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness"... and the end of the world, apparently; is it me, or does autumn regularly bring with it a rash of end time predictions? This year, we have a particularly rich harvest; not only is Nibiru heading our way, but it its arrival coincides with the Rapture, the heavenly rescue of the righteous that is definitely not for the short-haired. And to add to the syncretism, there is a quaint swathe of biblical astrology, tying the celestial headdress of the Virgin to a set of planetary conjunctions that is unique in history (or only happens four times every 1,000 years, or perhaps every 12 years, or isn't happening at all).

The virgin in question isn't necessarily Mary, an example of loose catechism I found both amusing and puzzling; it is assumed by some of the scores of YouTube contributors and Christian bloggers to be Virgo. This is the kind of admixture that would have got you burned at the stake in more overtly Christian times, but seems to be fine if you're a modern-day fundamentalist. It also resonates with commentaries on biblical esotericism from all sorts of occult thinkers that your average evangelical might not approve of (think Crowley and co, among others). More orthodox consumers of prophecy can always rely on the arcane numerology derived from a generous interpretation of the term 'week' in the book of Daniel and – hey presto – come up with the same date without dirtying their hands with pagan filth.

Astrology and Christianity have enjoyed an ambiguous relationship over the last couple of thousand years: on the one hand, popes who consulted astrologers before making decisions; on the other, a purgatorial basket-load of addled but perfectly devout people identified as heretics because they insisted on looking up. But at least it's a relationship; quite how Sitchin's fantasy version of ancient history got into the canon of contemporary Christian thought, albeit at the extreme end, is more of a mystery.

The most popular date currently doing the Rapture rounds is 23 September this year, with the Second Coming due in 2020. On that day, the conjunction of planets in Virgo will fulfil a signal prophecy from the book of Revelation (12: 1-2).

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

The poor woman is also in labour, though it's not clear who or what she is giving birth to; with Jupiter in Virgo at the same time, one might expect a kingly messiah, but then the 2020 vista takes on a distinct, and most un-Christian, competitive edge. Since this is all going on at the same time as God plans to pull the righteous up to Heaven for a ringside seat at the Apocalypse, our autumnal skies are promising to be a tad crowded one way and another.

More than one commentator has noted the flexible persuasions of Christian conspiracy theorists, many of whom seem perfectly comfortable holding ostensibly opposing points of view. Nibiru, for instance: the Sitchin saga goes back way beyond the sort of timeline commonly accepted in the Evangelical community for the age of the Earth (Ussher is a more usual point of reference); and the effective creation of humankind by reptilian bio-engineers does not fit seamlessly onto a literal reading of Genesis. But hey, if you're expecting a divine tug on your forelock any day now, why quibble about where the proof came from?

https://revelation2012.ch/mensonge-ou-verite/38-articles-in-english/384-rapture-of-the-church-in-2017-and-second-coming-of-jesus-in-2020; www.express.co.uk/news/weird/853642/End-of-the-World-The-Rapture-September-23-239-Nibiru-Planet-X; http://writers-web-services.com/asteroid-tx-68/

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

PRAWNS PROTECT BEES FROM KILLER HORNETS

D.Telegraph, 5 Nov 2016.

Russian man dismembers friend for insulting his accordion skills

Moscow Times, 31 Oct 2016.

MUM SPENDS £400 ON SWORD SWALLOWER'S PICKLED EAR LOBES

Nottingham Post, 13 Oct 2016.

Missing girl wakes up to herself after sleepover

(Queensland) Courier-Mail, 20 Aug 2016.

LLAMAS GUARD TREES BY NIGHT

D.Telegraph, 19 Dec 2016.

RACKHAM IN SUSSEX

This autumn marks the 150th anniversary of Arthur Rackham's birth, on 19 September 1867. Rackham (1867-1939) was one of the leading illustrators in Britain's 'Golden Age' of book illustration. His iconic depictions of fairies, goblins, witches and anthropomorphic trees created an unsurpassed landscape of the fantastic, which influenced the likes of CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien. His instantly recognisable illustrations for many of our best-loved fairy tales and fables have become definitive.

He is linked to Bateman's, Rudyard Kipling's home in Burwash, East Sussex, through his illustrations for *Puck of Pook's Hill,* a tale Kipling based on the house and gardens, and to Sussex in general through a number of locations. To celebrate, the Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy has put together an exhibition of Rackham's work inspired by Sussex, which is currently running at Bateman's. Alongside the many works by Rackham are contemporary responses to them by artist Emma Martin.

FACING PAGE: *Landscape at Houghton, c1925* (private collection). Rackham and his wife lived at Houghton House between 1920 and 1929. Rackham's sister Meg stayed with them for a weekend in June 1925. One morning she walked out of the house and was never seen alive again. Her body was found four days later, about eight miles away near Chanctonbury Ring.

ABOVE: *In the Very,* a colour plate from *Puck of Pook's Hill* (Victoria and Albert Museum). Rackham was commissioned to illustrate the book for the 1906 American edition.

LEFT: Emma Martin: *Study of Beech Tree at Arundel Park, 2017.* "Every painting I create starts with a walk. I wander the lanes and woodlands of Sussex, always looking out for interesting trees or structures that might catch my eye. Once I find something interesting, I sit with it for a while and just look. I look at the object, perhaps a tree or stone, the surrounding area, I listen to what might be happening, and pay attention to any thoughts that pop in to my head... As an illustrator, Rackham had to fulfil criteria particular to each story he was illustrating. As a fine artist, I have no such constraint. I was able to go out into the countryside, and let my imagination take me on a journey with no set destination; a journey that started out there in the world, but that ultimately created works that lead us inward into our own personal psychological landscape."

Arthur Rackham in Sussex: A 150th Birthday Celebration continues until 29 Oct at Batemans, East Sussex. See www.chi.ac.uk/scff for details.

SIDELINES...

ROBOTS TERMINATED

Facebook shut down an experiment in Artificial Intelligence when two robots began talking in an unknown language after a programming error. Alice and Bob, two 'chatbots' – computer programs that can hold a conversation – modified English to make it easier for them to communicate, ending up creating an impenetrable language. They were inventing new phrases without any human input. *D.Mail, Sun, 1 Aug 2017*.

EVIDENCE OF TORTURE

Using electron microscopy, scientists examining linen fibres from the Turin Shroud have observed 'nanoparticles' not found in the blood of a healthy person. Elvio Carlino of the Institute of Crystallography in Bari, Italy, said high levels of creatinine and ferritin suggest "a scenario of great suffering". Prof Giulio Fanti of Padua University said they "point to a violent death". So the saga continues... *Metro, D.Mirror, 18 July 2017*.

MOG LIGHTS

A cat called Nigel stuck in a car for 36 hours alerted rescuers by putting on its hazard lights in Totterdown, Bristol. *D.Mirror, 15 Mar 2017*.

CANINE HERO

A Golden Retriever in Suzhou, eastern China's Jiangsu province, has cleared more than 2,000 plastic water bottles from a local river over the past decade. Trained by its owner, the dog will take 20 to 30 bottles from the river each day. The dog has become a local celebrity for its selfless act. *People's Daily Online, 7 July 2017*.

MARTIN ROSS

DISASTER UPDATES | Historic catastrophes revisited and revised

US NAVY / NATIONAL ARCHIVES

ABOVE: The *USS Indianapolis* seen in 1939.

SHARK AND CROC MASSACRES

A research team led by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen has located the wreck of the *USS Indianapolis*, 18,000ft (5,500m) down in the Philippine Sea. It had been torpedoed by a Japanese submarine on 30 July 1945. The 620ft (200m) heavy cruiser was on a mission to deliver parts for the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima a week later, on 6 August. Just 317 of the ship's crew of 1,197 survived after being spotted by chance when an American aircraft investigated an oil slick four days later. The 880 death toll is the largest loss of life in US naval history. About a quarter of the crew went down with the ship, while many of the survivors were picked off by sharks. "With each attack," said a survivor, "the clouds of blood in the water brought more sharks." *D.Mail, 21 Aug 2017*.

Another animal massacre story from the final year of World War II has been debunked – or at least modified. During the battle of Ramree Island off Burma in February 1945, some 900 Japanese troops crossed 10 miles of mangrove swamp to escape the Allies. The swamp was populated by saltwater crocodiles and scores of soldiers were killed as they

"With each attack, the clouds of blood in the water brought more sharks"

fled from Allied gunfire. One witness noted that "the screams of wounded men crushed in the jaws of huge reptiles and the scattered sound of rifle shots made for a cacophony of hell that has rarely been duplicated on Earth. At dawn the vultures arrived to clean up what he crocodiles had left." The incident was named by the Guinness record books as the "worst crocodile disaster in the world."

However, Dr Sam Willis has unearthed military papers in Burma that prove the men didn't perish at the hands of crocs but instead drowned or were shot dead by the Allies. It was only later that the crocs arrived to feed on the corpses. In an episode of the TV series *Nazi Weird War Two*, Dr Willis comments: "[The story] was possibly an attempted cover-up of an incredibly violent Allied naval bombardment, or the story could have been sparked by the crazed hallucinations of malarial troops." Guinness ordered 2017's record book to be amended. *Times, 10 Dec 2016*.

THE GREAT MOLASSES FLOOD

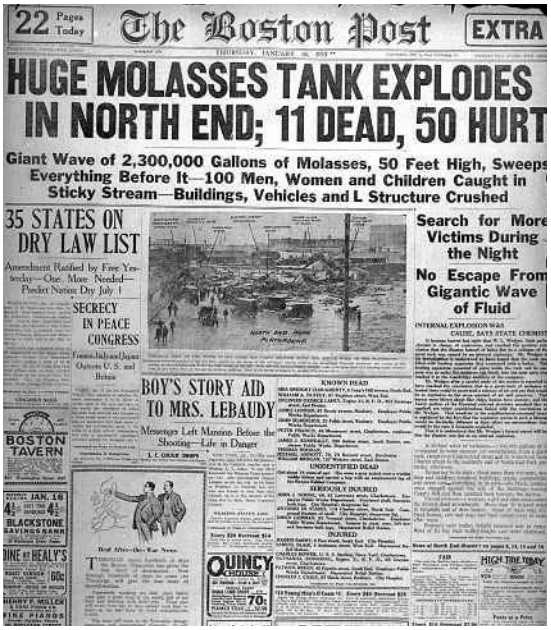
Shortly after 12.40pm on 15 January 1919, a muffled roar was the only indication that an industrial-sized storage vat containing 2.3 million US gallons (8.7 million litres) of molasses had burst, unleashing its contents through Boston's crowded North End business district near the docks. As the warm and sticky wave – initially reported to be 25ft (7.6m) tall – swept through streets at an estimated 35mph (56km/h), buildings were wrecked and wagons toppled. The death toll was 21, with about 150 injured. Two days before the disaster, the tank was about 70 per cent full when a shipment of molasses arrived, still warm (probably about 15˚C/59˚F) from the Caribbean, and the 50ft (15m) tank was filled to the top. Rumour had it that this was in anticipation of the 18th Amendment prohibiting alcoholic drink, which was ratified the day after the accident, and became law on 27 October that year. Molasses was a standard sweetener in the US, used in fermentation to make ethanol. The tank's walls were

half as thick as they should have been and were made of a type of steel that was too brittle.

In five minutes the wave had passed, but molasses were still waist-deep in the street. The stuff was several degrees Celsius warmer than the surrounding air, but quickly congealed. Water from fire-hoses failed to shift it and pistol shots were heard through the day as police humanely executed horses trapped like flies on fly-paper. Bostonians recalled how the harbour water was stained brown for six months and how molasses still seeped from sidewalk cracks 30 years later. Some insisted that after half a century you could still smell molasses in nearby houses whose basements had been flooded.

Harvard scientists recently revisited the incident, providing insights into why it proved so deadly. They performed fluid dynamics experiments to observe how corn syrup (standing in for molasses) behaves as temperature varies in a scale model of the affected neighbourhood. Presenting their findings at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Boston last February, they said the viscosity of the molasses was a crucial factor because it increases dramatically as it cools. This meant that, as night fell, it became dramatically more difficult to free victims before they suffocated. The evening temperature was as low as -16˚C (3˚F).

One lucky survivor was Anthony DiStasio, who bodysurfed the molasses through the North End into the harbour, and passed out. When his body, coated like a toffee apple, was recovered, a doctor pronounced him dead and he was taken to the city morgue. His sisters were summoned to identify him, but when the coroner drew back the sheet, DiStasio sprang to his feet, gluey and dizzy – but alive. *[AP] 23 Nov, NY Times, 30 Nov 2016; Guardian, 25 Feb 2017; "Famous "Americans You Never Knew Existed" (1979) by Bruce Felton and Mark Fowler. For other molasses floods, see* **FT53:24**, **129:12-13**, **311:5**.


22 Pages Today — The Boston Post — EXTRA

HUGE MOLASSES TANK EXPLODES IN NORTH END; 11 DEAD, 50 HURT

Giant Wave of 2,300,000 Gallons of Molasses, 50 Feet High, Sweeps Everything Before It—100 Men, Women and Children Caught in Sticky Stream—Buildings, Vehicles and L Structure Crushed

35 STATES ON DRY LAW LIST

Search for More Victims During the Night

No Escape From Gigantic Wave of Fluid

SECRECY IN PEACE CONGRESS

BOY'S STORY AID TO MRS. LEBAUDY

Messages Left Mansion Before the Shooting—Life in Danger

BOSTON TAVERN

QUINCY

TOP: The *Boston Post* of 16 January 1916 reports on the Great Molasses Flood that had swept through the city's streets the previous day. **ABOVE**: Cleaning up after the disaster.

SIDELINES...

MOSUL MIRACLE

Walid Ibrahim Khalil, 46, was standing in his doorway on 30 June when an allied air strike flattened his house in Mosul, Iraq. He was thrown clear, but his wife, two brothers-in-law, three children and two grandchildren were buried in the basement. Daesh snipers delayed any rescue attempt, and Khalil assumed his family were dead – but three weeks later they were all dug out alive. They had jerry cans of well water and, for the first 10 days, six spoonfuls boiled rice each per day. *D.Telegraph, 31 July 2017*.

TORTILLA CHRIST

Pilgrims flocked to the home of Iris Castellanos in Danli, eastern Honduras, after an image of Jesus Christ 'miraculously' appeared imprinted on a flour tortilla on 21 June. She was sitting down for dinner when her niece opened a bag of tortillas and came across the 'divine apparition'. Earlier this year the image of Christ is believed to have appeared in a tree trunk in the town of General Las Heras, Argentina, with thousands flocking to the site to receive a blessing. *D.Mail online, 23 June 2017.*

ALLIGATOR SNACK

Following a five-day binge smoking crystal meth with his girlfriend in Tavares, Florida, Frank Canfield, 52, ran into his backyard, disrobed, threatened his girlfriend with a knife before cutting off his genitals, vaulting a fence and running away. Neighbours found him writhing on the ground and he was hospitalised. CCTV footage showed him hurling his genitals towards an alligator in a nearby canal. The reptile consumed the meaty treat. *Boston Leader, 12 April 2017.*

TAKE THE STAIRS

Australian couple Bronwyn (63) and Graham Cowan (64), suing the City of London Corporation for £300,000 over a lift accident at Tower Bridge that left Mrs Cowan with broken ankles and her husband with a broken spine, had a panic attack when they got trapped in a lift on their way to the hearing at the Royal Courts of Justice in London. *(London) Eve. Standard, 11 April 2017*.

SIDELINES...

MECHANICAL BRIDE

After growing tired of his family nagging him to settle down, Zheng Jiajia, 31, an artificial intelligence engineer from Hangzhou, China, married a robot he had built himself, in a ceremony attended by his mother and friends. Yingying, as the robot is called, can say simple words, recognise images and read Chinese characters. Zheng hopes to upgrade his wife over the years, giving her the ability to move, walk and even do the housework. *Indy, 6 April 2017.*

TRAVELLING COMPANION

Amy Rebello-McCarthy was arrested for drink driving after she had swerved off a road in Massachusetts and knocked over six mailboxes with her Mercedes C280. The memorable feature of this incident was the bearded dragon lizard police found stuffed inside the woman's bra while she was driving. *D.Mirror, 20 May 2017.*

KNICKER ADDICT

A 61-year-old truck driver admitted stealing 2,000 pairs of knickers from washing lines after he was arrested in Tokyo. *Sunday People, 9 July 2017.*

OPTICAL HANDICAP

Surgeons at Solihull Hospital near Birmingham found 27 contact lenses bound together by mucus in a woman's eye while preparing her for cataract surgery. The lenses, which resembled a 'blueish mass' in the 67-year-old patient's eye, were causing her discomfort that she simply attributed to dry eye and old age. The case was reported in the *British Medical Journal*. The patient had been wearing monthly disposable contact lenses for 35 years. *Metro, 15 July 2017.*

MARTIN ROSS

GHOSTLY TALES

A cow-killing female spirit in Thailand, plus polts in Yorkshire and Lanarkshire

ABOVE: 2008's entry in the long-running *Baan Phi Pob* film series. **BELOW**: One of the women possessed by *phi pob* in 2016.

PHI POB RETURNS

Last June, officers of the Royal Thai Police Force were called on to undertake a ghost-busting mission in eastern Thailand, where a malevolent female ghost has reportedly left villagers spooked for months. Police were dispatched to a village in Amnat Charoen province to deal with the ghost, known locally as *phi pob*, which villagers said had killed four cows this year alone and caused four border police officers to fall ill. Village leaders had requested a police presence to strengthen civilian morale, prevent panic and boost residents' confidence in living their daily lives. According to the local police chief, "More people believe in [the *pai pob*] than those who don't." The *phi pob* is thought to have the ability to possess humans and wreak havoc on an entire village, with many rural communities reporting sightings or hauntings each year. In 2016, three individuals reportedly possessed by a *phi pob* forced family members and neighbours to strip naked at knifepoint. The spirit is the subject of a long-running Thai film franchise known as *Baan Phi Pob*.

Not all the 20 or more spirits that inhabit Thailand are malign. The *phi poang khang* spirit, for instance, is known to take the "shape of a black monkey that likes to hang out near salt licks in the jungle and suck the big toes of people sleeping there." At the other end of the spectrum is the *phi kra-sue* spirit, described as the most feared ghost in the country. It is said to take the form of a beautiful woman who mesmerises her prey and is "often seen in long flowing dresses to hide the fact that she has no lower body, just a mass of internal organs and intestines suspended from her head". *khaosodenglish.com, BBC News, 28 June 2017.*

LEVITATING THE DOG

A devout Catholic woman contacted Lanarkshire police in a panic on 8 August 2016 after enduring two days of "violent and unexplained circumstances" in the house where she lived with her teenage son in

ANTHONY FOSTER / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: Ripley Castle, seemingly home to some light-fingered ghosts. **BELOW**: The troubled house on Stonelaw Road, Rutherglen.

Stonelaw Road, Rutherglen, near Glasgow. She was described as "extremely distressed". The police attending expected it to be a "mental health issue"; instead they witnessed clothes flying across a room, and oven doors opening and closing. Lights went off – and when they came back on, the lampshades were upside down. Even a chihuahua dog that was playing in the garden was then discovered sitting on top of a 7ft (2m) hedge.

"Officers with more than 20 years' service are saying they've never seen anything like this," said a spokesman. "It really is something that down-to-earth police officers are having trouble getting their heads round. The officers called their superiors who also attended thinking the cops were perhaps being a bit silly, but it's being taken very seriously. But with no crime committed and no culprit we are at a loss how to proceed." Acting with the support of the family, the police contacted the Catholic Church who sent a priest to bless the house. No one had been harmed, but the family were given safety advice by baffled officers and chose to move out and stay with relatives. *D.Record, express.co.uk, 15 Aug 2016.*

HIDING THE CANDLESTICKS

Two pairs of Georgian silver candlesticks at Ripley Castle in North Yorkshire were last seen on Christmas Eve in 2014, but were not reported stolen until May 2016. Sir Thomas Ingilby, who owns the 14th century castle, was always convinced they would resurface again, given that a similar incident had happened before. A dessert spoon from a set of cutlery was reportedly nowhere to be found for 18 months before it resurfaced where it was supposed to be all along – in a locked wooden canteen. "I remember saying several times that I thought the candlesticks would reappear eventually," he said, "but we searched the castle thoroughly and, with no sign of them, we had to make the claim." This was for £8,500, made to Ecclesiastical, a specialist insurance firm in Gloucester.

A chihuahua dog was discovered sitting on top of a 7ft hedge

Sir Thomas's initial inkling, however, proved correct and the missing candlesticks reappeared in the castle's strong room – on a shelf in a bright red bag. "They were impossible to miss," he said. "To add insult to injury, they were sitting right next to the bag containing the replacements we had purchased with the money from Ecclesiastical. Three of us had searched the strong room from top to bottom and I had searched it on three separate occasions. To find them sitting there in such plain view was quite astounding." Sir Thomas then repaid the insurance money. "This is certainly the first time a customer has reimbursed us for items they suspect were returned by a ghost," said David Bonehill, claims director for Ecclesiastical.

The castle has a history of poltergeist activity and Sir Thomas suspects this is down to the ghosts of two children, Henry and Mary Ingilby, who died of leukaemia in the castle in the 19th century when they were aged only seven and five. *Insurance businessmag.com, 31 July; gloucestershirelive.co.uk, 3 Aug 2017.*

SIDELINES...

SAINTHOOD MADE EASIER

Pope Francis has decreed that Catholics no longer need to perform miracles to be canonised – they can simply be killed in the line of duty. One of the pontiff's first acts was to canonise the 813 killed at the siege of Otranto in 1480. This mass martyrdom was counted as one event. *D.Star, 14 July; D.Mail, 22 July 2017.*

LIMBS LOST

Cleaning contractor Sonja Kujas, 43, from Cologne in Germany, was bitten on the arm by an insect as she took out rubbish. The bite led to streptococcal infection, then blood poisoning, necessitating the amputation of both legs and her left arm. *(Sydney) D.Telegraph, 10 Aug 2017.*

NEW BLUE

In 2009 Mas Subramanian of Oregon State University discovered an entirely new colour while heating yttrium, indium and manganese in a laboratory oven. The bright blue shade is the first new blue pigment to be created since the French chemist Louis Jacques Thenard discovered cobalt blue in 1802. Later this year, the "new blue" will be available as a crayon from Crayola, replacing "dandelion", a yellow shade that is being retired. *D.Telegraph, 13 May 2017.*

HOMING SNAILS

Prof Dave Hodgson of Exeter University collected 65 snails from the four corners of a garden, painted them blue, red, orange, and pink (with a green control group from Cornwall) and filmed them overnight. They can travel 27 yards in 24 hours. The greens headed towards Cornwall, while almost all the local snails returned to their own corners. *Sunday Telegraph, 25 June 2017.*

RESOURCEFUL CONVICTS

Inmates of HMP Low Newton – the only female prison in England's north-east – are getting high on Buscopan, a drug used to combat Irritable Bowel Syndrome and stomach cramps. The tablets, legally available from chemists in packs of 20, are crushed up and smoked, providing a heroin-like effect. *Middlesbrough Eve. Gazette, 29 June 2017.*

SIDELINES...

SLIMY SOLUTION

Slimy slug mucus has inspired a new glue that can stick to slippery body tissue and could end the need for stitches. (Superglue has been used for decades, but is not suitable for internal injuries, because it is too toxic and will not stick to cells.) The idea came from the Dusky Arion species, the slime of which prevents predators prying it from a surface. It contains positively charged proteins, which are attracted to surfaces. *D.Telegraph, 28 July 2017*.

KISS AND SHELL

A man saved his drowning tortoise on 12 August after giving it the kiss of life for an hour. John Fletcher, 70, of Gloucester found 45-year-old Freda at the bottom of his garden pond limp and looking dead. "I decided to put my mouth around the head and give a few short blows, having stretched its head out a little," said the retired postman. He later used a hairdryer to warm up the tortoise and eventually it "started gasping and opening its eyes." *D.Telegraph, Sun, 15 Aug 2017.*

HEADLOCK

A teenager identified only as Dylan, camping in the wild, woke at 4am to find a black bear biting his head. The 19-year-old was working at a Christian summer camp near Boulder, Colorado. He heard a "crunching sound" as he was dragged from his sleeping bag: the bear's teeth were digging into his skull. After being pulled for about 12ft (3.6m), he freed himself by punching the bear and poking it in the eye. With the help of four campmates, he was able to shoo it away. He was treated briefly in hospital and released. *Metro, D.Mail, 11 July 2017*.

MARTIN ROSS

MEDICAL BAG

Fortean follicles equal permanent frizz for little girls and youthful locks for cancer patients

UNCOMBABLE HAIR SYNDROME

Several little girls with dramatically frizzy hair have featured in the press this year. They have Uncombable Hair Syndrome, an extremely rare condition. There are thought to be about 100 cases worldwide today; previous sufferers include Albert Einstein. The condition is caused by a gene mutation, making hair follicles heart-shaped rather than round. The first known case was reported in 1884 by a British doctor named LePage. His patient was a 17-year-old girl, and he decided she had hysterical tendencies, explaining that "high nervous tension… found vent in the hair itself. " He named the affliction *Plica neuropathica*, and for him at least the problem was solved [**FT78:18**].

One current victim of the syndrome is Lyla-Grace Barlow, five, from Derby. Her parents, Alex and Mark, both passed on a mutated gene – called PAD13 – resulting in the condition. Dr Andrew Messenger, a consultant dermatologist at Royal Hallamshire Hospital in Sheffield, has seen only three such cases during a 38-year career, and said there is no medical treatment, adding: "The hair tends to stand out from the scalp. It is usually blond and may have a spangly appearance." Other little girls with a permanent frizz are seven-year-old Shilah Calvert-Yin, of Melbourne, Australia, and nine-year-old twins Agnetha and Anja Norendal, of Cockermouth, Cumbria. The twins' mother, Angela, 52, said: "They're very proud of their hair, and they'll always stand out in a crowd." *Mail on Sunday, 2 April; D.Mirror, 28 July + 26 August; D.Mail, Sun, 26 Aug 2017.*

CATERS NEWS AGENCY

ABOVE: Seven-year-old Shilah Calvert-Yin, who has Uncombable Hair Syndrome.

HAIR TURNS DARK

A group of cancer patients' grey hair has unexpectedly turned youthfully dark after taking new types of immunotherapy drugs. The 14 patients in question, some in their 70s, were among 52 lung cancer patients in Spain being followed to see whether they developed bad side effects from Keytruda, Opdivo and Tecentriq (or Nivolumab, Pembrolizumab and Atezolizumab). The same drugs had been linked previously with hair *losing* colour in patients with another type of cancer – melanoma. In 13 of the patients in Spain, hair turned darkish brown or black. In one it turned black in patches. All but one of the 14 had at least stable disease and responded better to treatment than other patients, suggesting that hair darkening might be an indication that the drugs were working. FT has previously noted cases of grey hair naturally turning dark in some super-centenarians, an apparent sign of youth returning, a biological 'reboot' like third dentition (see "A chronological table of bodily renewal" **FT48:68-69**).

In 2013, James Le Fanu's "Doctor's Diary" in the *Daily Telegraph* reported that the hair of a 72-year-old woman in Leeds, which had started going grey in her early 40s and had been totally white for 20 years, began returning to its original brown in November 2012. Subsequent correspondents included a woman in her mid-60s who said: "My hair had been white for 20 years, but over the past month it has become progressively darker, so now I appear to be a natural brunette with expensive highlighting streaks." Most correspondents reported that the reactivation of the melanocytes in the hair follicle, which produces two types of pigment that provide a full range of hair colour, was spontaneous – but a former pharmacist reported this phenomenon following treatment for his coliac disease. As several attested, it can be a feature of the regrowth of hair lost following chemotherapy. There are also anecdotal reports that Kampuchea herbal tea can "recolour" white or greying hair. The reverse of this process, with sudden whitening of previously coloured hair, is well documented, with a couple of dozen cases reported in the medical literature, all preceded by severe emotional distress following battles, shipwrecks or rail crashes. The South African dermatologist Ashley Robins, in *Biological Perspectives on Human Pigmentation*, attributes this to a preferential loss of pigmented strands, with those left behind giving the appearance of sudden whitening. *Guardian, D.Mail, 22 July 2017; "Doctor's Diary" by James Le Fanu, D.Telegraph, 14+16 Jan 2013.*

CROSSTOWN
CONCERTS
PRESENTS

02|10|17
ANNIE HART
(AU REVOIR SIMONE)
- SHACKLEWELL ARMS - DALSTON

09|10|17
STEVIE PARKER
- MOTH CLUB, HACKNEY -

09|10|17
PITOU
- ST PANCRAS - OLD CHURCH

10|10|17
JOLIE HOLLAND + SAMANTHA PARTON
- UNION CHAPEL - ISLINGTON

SOLD OUT
THE PREATURES
- MOTH CLUB - HACKNEY

13|10|17
LAMB
- O2 SHEPHERD'S - BUSH EMPIRE

SOLD OUT
THE BREEDERS
- ELECTRIC BALLROOM -

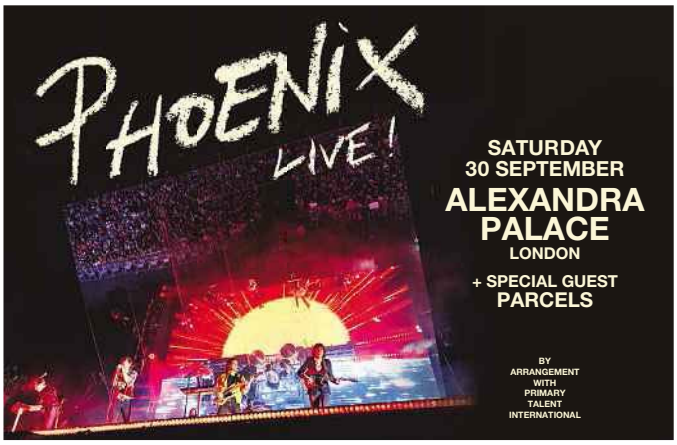
19|10|17
SOUND OF THE SIRENS
- THE WATER RATS -

24|10|17
PLAZA
- OLD BLUE LAST - SHOREDITCH

27|10|17
STEVEN PAGE
- BUSH HALL -

27|10|17
RALFY
- THOUSAND ISLAND - HIGHBURY

04|11|17
PETER PERRETT
- ELECTRIC BALLROOM -



07|11|17
ZOLA JESUS
- VILLAGE - UNDERGROUND

SOLD OUT
HVMM
- SEBRIGHT ARMS - HACKNEY

26|11|17
JIM WHITE
- DINGWALLS -

29|11|17
MARIAM THE BELIEVER
- THE LEXINGTON -

30|11|17
SLEEPTALKING
- THE VICTORIA - DALSTON

30|11|17
TOM WILLIAMS
- BUSH HALL -

01|12|17
JESCA HOOP
- UNION CHAPEL - ISLINGTON

SOLD OUT - 08|12|17
BERNARD FANNING
- THE GARAGE - HIGHBURY

09|12|17
GOLDIE LOOKIN' CHAIN
- OSLO, HACKNEY -

03|02|18
THE MENZINGERS
- O2 SHEPHERD'S - BUSH EMPIRE

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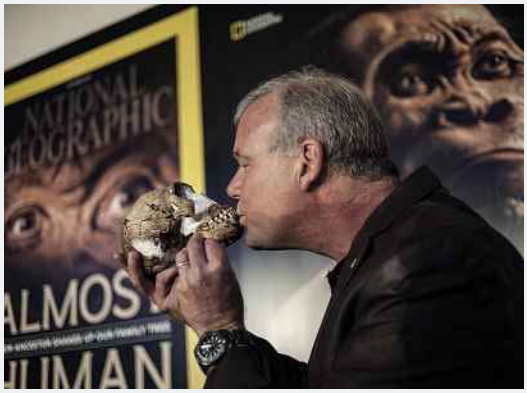
Humanity's tangled family tree

DAVID HAMBLING tries to navigate the increasingly complex pathways of our evolutionary journey

Human evolution once seemed like a simple linear progression from ape to human. Now it is a maze of paths that branch and re-join, where strange and unknown creatures lurk.

Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man,* published in 1871, daringly extended his big idea – evolution – to encompass humankind. Darwin proposed that that humans were not a separate creation but had evolved like everything else. Biology and anatomy suggested that humans and apes were related. Darwin did not say that humans were descended from modern apes, but that a common, ape-like ancestor gave rise to both.



STEFAN HEUNIS / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

LEFT: Professor Lee Berger kisses the skull of *Homo naledi*, first described in 2015.

The Victorians had uncovered fossils of early humans, notably remains found in the Neander valley, and named as 'Neanderthal Man' in 1856. Darwin never used the term 'missing link', a term invented by his mentor Charles Lyell to describe what are now known as transitional fossils between different types of creature. But as the popular press had it, there must be a missing link, a half-human in between apes and early humans, and all discovery of this intermediate stage would prove Darwin's theory. Piltdown Man, a 1912 hoax in which a human skull was joined to a chimpanzee jaw, was supposed to be exactly that missing link.

The linear view became even more deeply embedded in the popular imagination thanks to the iconic March of Progress illustration. Rudolph Zallinger drew the first version for *Time Life*'s 1965 *Early Man* book, and the image of a series of increasingly human species, marching ahead to culminate in modern man has been endlessly copied and parodied. Even in 1965, scientists knew that human evolution was not so simple, and that many of the species in Zallinger's picture were side branches. The text explained this, but the power of the image overwhelmed the words.

Evolutionary biologists were not too perturbed when the Neanderthals, our closest relatives, turned out to be cousins rather than ancestors. But the situation rapidly deteriorated in the 2000s with wave upon wave of new fossil discoveries.

At the distant end of human origins, a fossil called Ardi – short of *Ardipithecus ramidus* – discovered in 2009, is clearly a bipedal hominid. Ardi is adapted to walking upright and not swinging from branches like a chimp, but she lived over four million years ago. This directly contradicts the idea that our ancestors came down from the trees three million years ago, and pushes the separation from chimpanzees further back. Even more confusingly, in early 2017 some fossils of modern *Homo sapiens* from Morocco were shown to be 300,000 years old, 100,000 older than any previously found. This meant that modern humans must have overlapped with a huge – and growing – collection of other hominids. These include *Homo naledi*, first described in 2015. Originally thought to be over 2,000,000 years old because of archaic anatomical features (especially the hips), *Home naledi* turned out to be more like a 250,000 years old, and so would have lived alongside modern *Homo sapiens*.

At any given time, there seems to have been a wide variety of different hominids, parallel lines of evolution that sometimes merged. Neanderthals, who became extinct no more than 40,000 years ago, certainly co-existed with modern humans. At first it was thought there was no interbreeding between the two, but in 2010 DNA studies revealed that around two per cent of the DNA of non-African populations stems directly from Neanderthals. So, they were very close cousins indeed.

There was an even bigger genetic surprise in 2010, from a cave in Siberia known to be inhabited by both modern humans and Neanderthals. DNA analysis of some remains originally thought to be Neanderthal dated at 41,000 years showed they remains belonged to a third group, now known as Denisovans. Research continues to establish whether this is a new species or a subspecies. The Denisovans lived all across East Asia, and interbred both with modern humans and Neanderthals. Genome sequencing shows that the Denisovans interbred with yet another, mystery species, which has yet to be identified. This would have been yet another contemporary.

The most baffling and controversial discovery was *Homo floresiensis*. Fossils found from 2003 on the Indonesian island of Flores, revealed a new, diminutive race standing just over a metre tall – hence the nickname of 'hobbits' – who lived on the island until at least 50,000 years ago. DNA analysis has not yet been successful, and anatomical comparisons suggest ancestry from *Homo habilis*.

New discoveries (see p16 for a recent one) are likely to complicate matters further, as they can only expand the span of time over which each variety of hominid was known to exist. Neanderthals were certainly here 40,000 years ago, and some pockets may have survived into more recent times; and the same applies to other races.

While there is no obvious link to Sasquatch, yeti, Indonesian Gugu or other cryptozoological humanoids, it certainly appears that there were plenty of quasi-humans interacting with our ancestors. Many have suggested that this is the origin of stories of ape-men. Not to mention dwarves, goblins, trolls and ogres, all human-like but emphatically not human, and many of whom are traditionally cave dwellers.

While the Victorian scientific establishment might have been reluctant to admit new fossils that challenged existing theories, such discoveries have recently become commonplace. Everything is up for grabs. It is no longer heretical to publish findings that mean the textbooks may need to be rewritten and dates changed.

"If Mike had said he'd found evidence of an alien spaceship on Flores, I would have been less surprised," was palæoanthropologist Peter Brown's first reaction to the *Homo florisiensis* find. But Brown accepted it readily enough once the evidence had been gathered.

While alien spaceships have not yet turned up, we are living in a golden age of hominid discovery. The next round of findings may plug some of the gaps in our knowledge and help make sense of our tangled family tree. Although, on past evidence, it is just as likely to produce more surprises and more confusion.

Charles Fort would surely have loved it.

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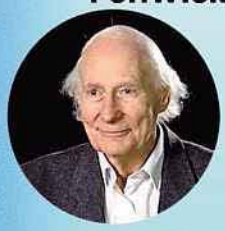

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PAUL DEVEREUX, Managing Editor of *Time & Mind*, digs up the latest archæological discoveries

EVOLUTION GOES WALKIES

We often have to report on the discovery of ancient footprints, and this time a set of fossilised tracks recently uncovered at Trachilos in western Crete is giving some hitherto established theories a bit of a kicking. They are clearly human footprints (which are distinct from those of other creatures, even apes – something to do with the big toe, among other features, apparently) and have been pretty securely dated by analysis of marine microfossils from over- and underlying beds together with the fact that they lie just below a very distinctive sedimentary rock formed when the Mediterranean briefly dried out 5.6 million years ago. These factors put the footprints at c.5.7 million years old.

It has been assumed that the earliest human ancestors ('hominins') started out in Africa, but there the oldest truly human-like footprints indicating an upright gait date to about 3.7 million years ago. (Earlier African human precursors have tracks showing some ape-like characteristics.) The African finds led to the assumption that modern humans originally strayed out of Africa, but the now seeming fact that modern human ancestors were strolling around Mediterranean Europe millions of years earlier than the African examples challenges that assumption. Challenges, but doesn't necessarily usurp it, because 5.7 million years ago Crete was part of the Greek mainland, and would theoretically have been accessible via land from Africa. But it could also mean that modern humans evolved independently in different regions, even Europe. (Coincidently, earlier in the year, as

ANDRZEJ BOCZAROWSKI

mentioned in this column previously, another research team reinterpreted 7.2-million-year-old fossil fragments found in Greece and Bulgaria as a previously unknown hominin.) At any rate, as a member of the international team that uncovered the Cretan footprints put it: "This discovery challenges the established narrative of early human evolution head-on and is likely to generate a lot of debate." No kidding – apparently there were even some difficulties in getting this discovery published. *Phys.Org News, 31 Aug; Newsweek, 1 Sept 2017*.

Hard on the heels (pardon the pun) of the announcement of the Cretan footprints, comes another related story. While this column was being written, a report appeared stating that Greek police had arrested a man in connection with the theft of 10 of the aforesaid footprints. The thieves had cut away and removed the section of rock containing the footprints. Investigations continue. *TornosNews.gr, 16 Sept 2017*.

A NICE PIECE OF CHEDDAR

Prehistoric human bones discovered in Gough's Cave in the Cheddar Gorge in Somerset clearly show evidence of cannibalism. Such cut-marked and broken human bones are a recurrent feature of Magdalenian European sites (c.17,000-12,000 BP), and Gough's Cave has yielded one of the most extensive assemblages of human bones ever found from that period. Now, complex funerary behaviour in relation to the cannibalism has been indicated resulting from analysis undertaken by anthropologist Dr Silvia Bello and her team at London's Natural History Museum. They studied and compared zigzag incisions on one arm bone with hundreds of butchering marks and engravings on human and animal bones from Gough's Cave and other archæological sites. The marks on the arm bone match patterns on engraved animal bones found in France from the same time period, suggesting it was a common motif. A single individual, using one tool, during only one event, produced the engraving, and appears to have been part of cannibalistic ritual activity previously unrecognised for the Palæolithic period. *PLOS One, 9 Aug; New York Times, 10 Aug 2017*.

TO A FAULT

Iain Stewart, Professor of Geoscience Communication at Plymouth University, has put forward a theory suggesting that the Ancient Greeks may have built sacred structures deliberately on sites affected by earthquake activity ("Seismic faults and sacred sanctuaries in Aegean antiquity", Proceedings of the Geologists' Association, 2017). Indeed. As this columnist has pointed out in various books over many years, the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, seat of the line of prophetesses there, is located over a geological fault-line that issued hydrocarbon fumes

PAUL DEVEREUX

LEFT: The ruins of the Temple of Apollo, Delphi. The oracular cell of the Pythia or prophetess, located over geological faulting, was at the right-hand end of the temple.

that would have intoxicated the various ladies when giving their oracular utterances. Now, Stewart has broadened the scope, claiming sites at Mycenæ, Ephesus, Cnidus and Hierapolis may also have been constructed specifically on fault lines. Despite the Aegean region being riddled with faulting, Stewart nevertheless considers it "more than a coincidence that many important sites are located directly on top of fault lines... The Ancient Greeks placed great value on hot springs unlocked by earthquakes, but perhaps the building of temples and cities close to these sites was more systematic than has previously been thought." *Phys. Org News, 12 Sept 2017*.

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

217: A LOAD OF OLD CRAP

I dedicate this column to venerable punk band Raw Sewage.

"To merely open the bowels is not enough" – Henry Miller, 'Reading in the Toilet'; in *Plexus*, Miller's friend MacGregor has a long disquisition on the difficulties and mechanics of cleaning one's bottom – arse gratia artis?

This essay is partly inspired by Peter Handke's *Versuch über den Stillen Ort* ('Experiment on the Place of Stillness,' 2012), a euphemism in keeping with Greek and Latin ones for 'the smallest room'. One of these surfaces in the Hambledon Cricket Club minutes of September 1784, recording the construction of a *dulce lenimen* (sweet relief) for the ladies.

It always seemed too good to be true that Thomas Crapper should have invented the flush toilet. And not so, although he did introduce the ballcock. To rub it in, 'crap' is not derived from his name, being of Middle English and Old French origins, first appearing as synonym for shit in 1846.

Anglo-credit goes to Sir John Harington (1561-1612), a courtier (until his disgrace) of Elizabeth I who dubbed him her 'saucy godson'. Harington publicised his novelty in *A New Discourse of a Stale Subject, called the Metamorphosis of Ajax* (1596). Ajax, of course, is a pun on 'Jakes' meaning 'lavatory', defined in Grose's *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1796) as university slang for 'a place of office, a cacatorium,' except at Oxford where they said 'bog'.

But its history may go back as far as Bronze Age Crete, where there seems to be archæological evidence of a flush toilet in the Queen's Megaron at the Knossos Palace (cf. the anonymous 'History of Plumbing – Crete', *P & M Magazine*, July 1989, online). I hedge my bets with 'may' and 'seem' because cynics may here see another of Sir Arthur Evans's surreptitious reconstructions rather than the hand of King Minos.

No such amenity in classical Athenian houses, where the chamberpot ruled supreme. In Aristophanes's *Women of Parliament*, a character comes out to the garden in the dark to defecate. Another play (*Acharnians*), has arses wiped with a stone (cf. JK Papadopoulos, 'Notes from The Tins 2,' *Hesperia* 71, 2002, 423-7).

Although hard to verify, Tennyson (a fellow-Lincolnshire man) is attributed with: "I wipes me arse on a piece of grass

or sometimes on a stone." Where I grew up, the yard's communal outside lav was equipped with newspaper – one chose according to political preference – for the purpose. As Kingsley Amis describes in *Take A Girl Like You*, this economy had its dangers: "His mother had the habit of putting greaseproof wrapping and old sweet-bags out in the lavatory, and one dark morning her father had had trouble as a result of half a stray acid-drop."

The Roman Andrex was a communal sponge-on-a-stick (cf. Matthew Britten's online essay, 'Lifting the Lid on Roman Toilet Behaviour'). Seneca (*Epistles* 70) describes how a terrified trainee wild-beast fighter committed suicide by choking himself to death with one of these – got the wrong end of the stick.

Public lavatories at Rome are first mentioned in a speech of 161 BC. Rudimentary affairs: "jars at street-corners". Rome became well provided with conveniences – 116 in the Aurelian Wall alone. There's archæological evidence for rows of underground ones in the Colosseum, while Fulgentius (fr13) alludes to toilets in theatres and circuses.

Vespasian (Suetonius, ch13 para3) was the first to tax sales of excrement and urine to gardeners and fullers. When son Titus objected, he produced a coin symbolising these revenues quipping "Does this smell?" – hence the proverb *pecunia non olet* and the French 'Vespasienne' for the old-fashioned pissoir.

Odd things happened in Roman conveniences – some suggestions in Martial of 'cottaging'. In Suetonius's *Life of Lucan*, the poet once accompanied an explosive disembogue with shouting Nero's verse describing a thunderbolt, causing the other occupants to vacate the row of stalls in terror of such ridicule of the emperor – Tiberius for his part forbade carrying coins depicting himself into public latrines.

As described in my inaugural Classical Corner [April 2000, **FT133:24**], the heretic Arius exploded in a Constantinople bog. Many websites list famous people expiring on the throne. Popular names (and considerable dispute) include George II, Catherine the Great, Evelyn Waugh, Lenny Bruce, and Elvis.

Not forgetting Edmund Ironside, said in one source to have quit in mid-battle, taken short, and hastening to a lavatory where – how unlucky can you get? – there was hiding a Viking soldier who pronged him twice up the jacksie with a javelin – still, nothing, compared to Edward II's red-hot poker demise.

How about graffiti? The Greeks had a word for it – Rhyparography; cf. Jim Morrison (*not* The Doors one), *Privy Thoughts: A Selection of Graffitied Musings Found on University Toilet Doors* (2012), plus Bijan Omrani's blog, 'Smart Arses – Saving the Bodleian Library's Toilet inscriptions'. Classicist-poet Louis McNiece claimed to have seen Heraclitus's maxim *Panta rhei kai ouden menei* (Everything flows and nothing remains) in one urinal. Lord Byron scratched up one praying for "a perfect stool". My own favourite on a door-bottom is 'Beware Limbo Dancers'.

Early Byzantine poet Agathias wrote four ditties (*Greek Anthology*, bk9 nos642-4, 662) on the futility of gourmandising (All comes out the other end...) with graphic descriptions of eruptive bowel movements. An epigram on 'That Strumpet Fortune' by Palladas of Alexandria (*Greek Anthology*, bk10 no87) is reproduced on a bog wall at Ephesus. Do we envisage Palladas trekking here to relieve himself, holding the poem in one hand, the future of the epigram in the other? He was a conservative: does that make him a lava-tory?

The ghost in Claudia's bedroom

ALAN MURDIE recalls how he inadvertently started a ghost hunt in Claudia Schiffer's mansion

Back in 2001, noted ghost and UFO author (now turned novelist) John Spencer observed in a lecture delivered to the Ghost Club: "Why is it that ghosts so often return to places where they were unhappy or met tragic deaths? Why not go off to somewhere altogether more pleasant – why not Claudia Schiffer's bedroom?".

I couldn't help but recall this jocular metaphysical speculation when reading press headlines at the start of August 2017, declaring, "Claudia Schiffer unveils her haunted mansion". These were prompted by the feature in the forthcoming edition of *Architecture Digest* focusing upon the 14-bedroomed antique home owned by the international model and businesswoman (September edition). On showing the representatives of the magazine around this stately west Suffolk mansion, dating from 1574, the lady they describe as 'the Teutonic Bombshell' stated, "We had a medium go around, and she told us that actually all the ghosts in the house are lovely," and that "no-one needs to be scared."

I experienced considerable relief at reading this revelation, since it evoked some personal memories of my own going far beyond John Spencer's jocular remark, dating back to the spring of 2002 when Claudia Schiffer married Hollywood film producer Matthew Vaughn. As their nuptials approached, the story of the haunting of their magnificent mansion became a global sensation, along with even darker imputations concerning two reputedly cursed pictures hanging on its walls. I recollect all of this very well, since I must confess to being inadvertently responsible for bringing these stories to worldwide notice, prompting the attendance of mediums to drive the ghosts away and triggering more than a decade of media obsession with particular events in the lives of this glamorous celebrity couple which I am sure many of us could have survived in knowing much less about.

So, in penitential spirit and for the record, let me explain how this all arose....

Some 15 years ago Claudia and Matthew were in the first flush of love and chanced to find themselves in eastern England. Like many celebrities and famous personalities before them (e.g. Bill Wyman, John Peel, Twiggy, Ed Sheeran, Benjamin Britten, and the Kray twins), they were enchanted by the gentle Suffolk countryside and were swept up by a desire to acquire a permanent country seat. Rapidly purchasing (at a rumoured cost of £5 million) a suitably spacious, period residence that caught their fancy, they wasted no time in fixing this as the venue for their reception after exchanging their marriage vows in a nearby country church.

JOHN FIELDING / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE LEFT: Coldham Hall, the Suffolk mansion currently owned by Claudia Schiffer and her husband.

> "We had a medium go round. She told us that actually all the ghosts in the house are lovely"

Understandably keen to avoid the ordeal of the intrusive eyes and lenses of press reporters, paparazzi and gawping onlookers, they engaged leading PR firm Freud Communications to control media coverage and access, backed up by an ultra-efficient security team. In advance of their big day, a veritable ring of steel worthy of a quarantine sector in a zombie apocalypse film was established around both the church and their historic dwelling, temporarily closing a public footpath for good measure and deploying 20 police. Only a select few were permitted to penetrate this *cordon sanitaire*, ensuring all photographic rights could be exclusively licensed to *Hello!* magazine, and leaving all other representatives of the fourth estate, whether global, national or local, circling outside in ever-more eccentric orbits, alongside a gathering of rather disappointed, if naïve, locals denied any chance to wave at and congratulate the glamorous couple and their invited celebrity guests on the big day.

Though living nearby in Bury St Edmunds at the time, I must admit to having been only vaguely aware of the preparations for this hullabaloo, such little as I learnt being distilled from those great organs of light and truth, the *East Anglian Daily Times* (founded 1874) and the *Bury Free Press* (founded 1782). But I was suddenly struck by the significance of the name of the grand house which Claudia and Matthew had acquired and would be repairing – Coldham Hall, near the village of Stanningfield.

As I had long known, Coldham Hall had a local reputation for being haunted. Back in 1979, in my teenage years investigating ghosts of the neighbourhood, I had heard many stories about its phantoms. Even more remarkably, there were two 'cursed' pictures hanging inside that tradition averred should never be taken down.

These stories had come to me from Mr Richard Duce (or Luce), the then owner of Coldham Hall. By then resident for more than 20 years, Mr Duce was a retired metals dealer (of the scrap variety) who had bought up Coldham Hall for a song in

the early 1950s, when it was just one of a number of empty mansions and stately homes decaying around East Anglia. Visitors to Coldham Hall would be told of how the ghost of Penelope Rookwood, from the 17th century, prowled at night. The daughter of the original builder, Penelope is said to have become a nun, the hall having been a secret centre of Roman Catholic worship. Some versions of the story linked her with the terrorist intrigues of her brother, Ambrose Rookwood, a Gunpowder Plot conspirator along with Guy Fawkes. Though Mr Duce had not seen her apparition, he considered there was a presence, saying sometimes the house "seemed to cloud over, even on summer days".

He would also show visitors his two cursed paintings, handed down over generations. These were portraits, very old, of two women dressed in nuns' habits. He had been told when he bought the house that they should never be taken down, otherwise disaster would strike the house and its occupants. Respecting the tradition, Mr Duce moved them along the picture rail when spring-cleaning but never took them down.

At that time, I was not impressed by tales of curses, jinxes and hoodoos. But then, as now, I felt such fascinating curios should be preserved, not from fear of dire consequences, but as relics of our supernatural cultural heritage. While I would be delighted to possess such items, I am aware that many others do not share my enthusiasm, including many who come to acquire such objects after purchasing old houses. Regrettably, all too many specimens of haunted furniture, psychic art and screaming skulls have been dumped by superstitious or gullible new owners or custodians, often pressurised by nervous family members and employees. In other cases, the new owners simply failed to appreciate the cultural significance of such objects and simply disposed of them. With Coldham Hall in the press again in 2002, I found myself wondering if its new celebrity owners had been properly informed of its ghost and pondering the possible whereabouts and fate of the pictures.

It struck me that it might be a thoughtful gesture to formally inform Claudia Schiffer and Matthew Vaughn of the situation. Accordingly, via the Ghost Club, I wrote offering congratulations upon their forthcoming wedding and the acquisition of Coldham Hall, and telling them about the ghost. I also put in a plea to preserve the ill-fated paintings if they were still *in situ*. Regrettably, neither this nor an enquiry by Ghost Club General Secretary Robert Snow received any reply, but our efforts at alerting Claudia Schiffer and Matthew Vaughn did not go unnoticed, especially after I appealed for further information on the matter to the *East Anglian Daily Times*, sharing with them a yellowing press cutting from the *Bury Free Press* (8 May 1979) mentioning the stories. I was somewhat surprised the next evening (22 May 2002) to see the normally staid *East Anglian Daily Times* light-heartedly and rhetorically asking if Claudia was going to be 'given the shivers' by the ghost of a nun called Penelope. To quote James Thurber, this proved 'the night the ghost got in'. By morning this minor story had been flashed, cabled, faxed and e-mailed around the globe.

It was an example of the law of unintended consequences, arising partly from the restrictions on media access imposed by use of an exclusive publicity agency. With coverage of the forthcoming nuptials yoked to Freud Communications, journalists were tumbling over themselves in the hunt for any sort of independent story. Reporters starved of gossip and images of the happy couple and their famous guests were driven to writing about the haunting, with leading celebrities finding themselves upstaged by speculation concerning a ghostly nun from the 17th century.

I was duly bombarded with enquiries and requests for quotes and further details by journalists from various British, American and German papers, magazines and news programmes, all clearly overcome by the excitement of the occasion. Breathless writers at New York fashion magazines, garrulous Californian radio station hosts and bemused German TV researchers all wanted to know just what was in store for the couple, having bought a haunted house. How would the ghost reveal itself? Would Penelope's ghost actually turn up on the couple's eagerly anticipated big day, and, if so, just what might transpire if it did? Such were the questions flowing from animated reporters and broadcasters desperate to fill column inches and slots on German afternoon television shows aimed at suburban hausfraus.

Trying my best to restore some balance, I told them that ghosts in the UK were generally little trouble at all and were not to be expected to gatecrash wedding celebrations; such things were the provenance of fiction rather than fact. True, Lord Byron had claimed to have seen the 'Goblin Friar', the harbinger of death and disaster for the Byron family, on the eve of his ill-fated marriage to Anne Milbanke in 1815, but there was certainly no tradition of the ghostly Penelope of Coldham Hall behaving like that.

Admittedly, poltergeist activity had also sometimes been recorded prior to wedding ceremonies; indeed, Germanic tradition recognises *poltern-abends*, a kind of rowdy prenuptial stag night involving crockery-smashing (philologists will note the same etymological root for the verb 'poltern', meaning 'to rattle or rumble'). But as I endeavoured to point out, one had to venture a long way back down the corridors of time to identify any important wedding celebration being spoilt by a spectral appearance, all the way back to 1285 Jedburgh Castle, Scotland, where a skeleton supposedly materialised at the wedding breakfast of King Alexander III of Scotland. Possibly the origin of the phrase 'skeleton at the feast', this interruption was grossly inflated in Edgar Allen Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*. Such a notion has attracted artists spanning the centuries, from the classic *Death Comes to the Table* by Giovanni Martinelli (1600-1659) to the morbid and disgusting orgy

BEN STANSALL / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Claudia Schiffer and film director husband Matthew Vaughn.

ABOVE: A skeleton at the feast in Giovanni Martinelli's *Death Comes to the Table*.

conjured up in Jean Jansem's 1997 canvas *St Maxent* – apparently former cricketer Allan Lamb's favourite painting (*Country Life,* 2 Aug 2017). More historical writers speculated that the Jedburgh spectre was "a foolish pleasantry to frighten the court ladies, a pious monastic fraud, to check the growth of promiscuous dancing" (*Annals of Scotland* by Sir James Dalrymple, 1776). But as I sought to make abundantly clear, this was England in 2002, where Prime minister Tony Blair assured us things could only get better, and Coldham Hall would be seeing Sir Elton John, Guy Ritchie, Madonna, Boris Becker and the like attending, not waltzing skeletons.

Predictably, much was also made of the notorious 'cursed' paintings, which I also played down, trying to emphasise their historical and cultural interest. Afterwards I received the counsel of ghost author and Fleet Street veteran Dennis Bardens (1911-2004) who presciently warned me, "The press will have a lot of fun with that". And so has it proved.

The routine vicissitudes of life which scarcely rate a mention even in the most minor 'parish pump' section of provincial newspapers when they befall lesser mortals are elevated into world-shaking events when royalty and celebrities are involved. The London *Evening Standard* in particular developed a fixation on 'Calamity Claudia'. And, thus, whenever some minor adverse incident or upset occurred in her life or her family, it was reported. For instance, the paper declared that the couple "must be wondering what lies in store for them next" when their toddler son fell over and needed a bandage, and Matthew Vaughn, on his way to a meeting shortly afterwards, was in a road accident (he still made his meeting) though sustaining injuries that led to Claudia putting his arm in a sling, ahead of his consultation with a Harley Street doctor the next day.

Adding currency to notions that all was not well at Coldham Hall was news that a medium called Elizabeth Bridgman had been summoned to conduct rituals inside the house in 2003. Inaccurately described as an exorcism, these were not the formal rite of the Church, but an improvised ceremony for supposedly banishing spirit entities. The press also picked up on more serious random events. An obsessed 21-year-old Canadian man was deported after stalking the couple outside their home and attempts by the couple to permanently close a local footpath running near the house to protect their privacy failed. Then there was trouble with their pet dogs in 2006. Ms Schiffer was reported as being set to be quizzed by local police following incidents of her dogs "running wild" (*D.Telegraph*, 8 Sept 2006), a postman having been bitten by Oscar, a German Shepherd owned by the couple, and they also paid out for veterinary treatment after their wolfhound bit an "elderly Jack Russell" owned by a local man.

More followed. In 2008 some barns close to Coldham Hall were deliberately set alight and in 2009 Claudia was on a Eurostar train that broke down for hours, although her celebrity status ensured her rescue ahead of all the other passengers. Then in 2011, the *Evening Standard* (6 Sept) claimed that "spooked supermodel" and her family were "living in London recently, because they had to call in an exorcist to dispel the spirits in their £5 million property in Suffolk". But long after returning from this exile there was more in store, when the day after their 12th wedding anniversary in May 2014 a fire swept through outbuildings at Coldham Hall devastating stables and a clock tower (*D.Mail*, 27 May 2017).

Personally, I do not believe there is any link between the two portraits and these unfortunate events. Accidents happen, travelling by train often involves delays, and residents of West Suffolk are no more immune from biting dogs and fires than people anywhere else. Indeed, hitherto archived material that indicates that the whole curse story may be nothing more than a 'garbled memory' of an actual historic ghost sighting has been uncovered by Dr Francis Young, author of *English Catholics and the Supernatural 1533-1829* (2013). This was found amongst the papers of the Rookwood and Gage families preserved at Cambridge University Library.

In 1807, when Coldham Hall was owned by Sir Thomas Gage, it was leased to a General Hammond. One night Hammond's servant was terrified to see two strangely dressed women emerge from the two portraits and walking towards the stairs. Dropping the tray he was carrying, he fled in terror.

Sir Thomas Gage was so engaged by this incident that he commissioned a mezzotint drawing of two ghosts appearing in the house. Of course, mention of mezzotints calls up the ghost story by M R James, which concerns a subtly changing haunted picture that displays an animated spectral form re-enacting for spectators an historic child abduction at a stately home. But beyond fiction, relatively few accounts of ghosts issuing from paintings exist even in folklore (e.g. Lady Hoby at Bisham Abbey, Berks, and the Green Lady at the Golden Lion Hotel, St Ives, Hunts). An unusual aspect of the Coldham Hall mezzotint, a copy of which Dr Young found in the papers, is that it portrays these apparitions as dressed in secular clothing rather than the religious habits of the nuns in the physical portraits. Dr Young ventures that the paintings themselves depict canonesses of the priory of the Holy Sepulchre in Liège, one being Jane Cary, or sister Frances Ignatius, its first prioress in 1642. Records of the paintings at Coldham Hall are traceable to 1737.

I agree that confused recollections of the 1807 sighting by the servant (perhaps enhanced by a surreptitious nightcap from his master's wine or brandy) and specially commissioned illustration could have been exaggerated in oral re-tellings, and become the cursed paintings stories circulating by the 1950s.

Thus, taken together with Claudia Schiffer's reassuring statement this August, I feel all negative supernatural tales spun about Coldham Hall may be safely laid to rest as being without foundation.

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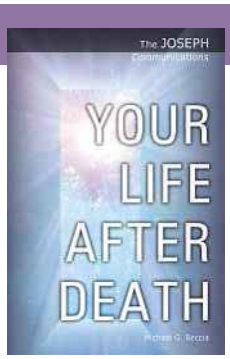

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PROVENANCE UNKNOWN

A toxic cloud hits the Sussex coast while diplomats come under sonic attack in Cuba

MYSTERY MIST

Just before 5pm on Sunday, 27 August, a strange yellow "mist" rolled over Birling Gap, near Beachy Head in East Sussex, causing breathing difficulties, stinging eyes and vomiting. The plume of gas moved eastwards along the coast as far as Bexhill. Coastguard rescue teams from Birling Gap, Eastbourne, Bexhill and Newhaven raced to help clear the busy beaches as visitors feared they had been struck by a chlorine leak or some kind of terrorist attack. Local people were advised to keep doors and windows closed. By Sunday night, about 150 patients were taken to Eastbourne District General Hospital. They were told to place their clothing in a decontaminating liquid before being hosed down – with some needing oxygen to help them breathe. The police said the effects, while uncomfortable, were not serious, and the local fire service said it was "extremely unlikely" the substance involved was chlorine. Some said the cloud smelt of "burnt plastic".

Although media reports focused on the beach at Birling Gap, air pollution monitors show that the affected area was much bigger. An apparent sharp rise in ozone was detected on Eastbourne sea front at 4:45pm and then about 30 minutes later at Lullington Heath, 5 miles (8km) to the west and 3 miles (5km) inland from Birling Gap – an area of over 15 miles^2 (40 km^2). However, the symptoms were inconsistent with the apparent concentration of ozone detected, suggesting that the gas was not actually ozone or that it was ozone plus something else.

In the past, fumes have drifted across the Channel from European factories. In January 2013, a foul-smelling gas cloud prompting thousands of calls to the emergency services in Sussex, Kent, Surrey and Hampshire was tracked down to an industrial plant in Rouen, France. In this latest incident, police considered a possible discharge of gas from northern France, but later said wind patterns showed the cloud came from the Channel, or further along the English coast. "It is weird that the 'cloud' rolled in from the west," said Dr Simon Boxall of the National Oceanography Centre in Southampton. "This is against the very light winds, which should have driven in from the east. This implies a water-borne cause. Conditions yesterday were ideal for the development of a toxic algal bloom – very calm, high light levels, and a period of moderate runoff inputting high levels of nutrients into the sea for the preceding weeks."

One unnamed scientist said: "It might be a container of chemicals washed off a ship and ruptured. It might not necessarily be chlorine as other chemicals produce a similar smell and reaction when mixed with water." Investigators were considering a number of possibilities, such as discharges from a vessel, previously unreported lost cargo, and emissions from known shipwrecks. One suspect was the *SS Mira*, a British armed trawler sunk by a mine laid by a German submarine four miles (6.4km) off Beachy Head on 11 October 1917. Perhaps the wreck shifted on the seabed and leaked a toxic vapour that bubbled to the surface and formed a cloud. There are plenty of other wrecks off the Sussex shore that could be responsible. At the time of writing, no source of the strange cloud had been found. *BBC News, 28 Aug, 1 Sept; D.Telegraph, 28+29 Aug; D.Mail, Sun, 29 Aug; D.Mirror, 2 Sept; Sussex Express, 8 Sept; Guardian, 10 Sept 2017.*

KYLE CRICKMORE / TWITTER

ABOVE: Emergency services at Birling Gap to investigate the vomit-inducing mist

'SONIC WEAPON' IN CUBA?

The blaring, grinding noise jolted the American diplomat from his bed in The Capri, a Havana hotel. He moved just a few feet, and there was silence; back in bed, the agonizing sound hit him again. Soon came the hearing loss and speech problems, symptoms both similar and altogether different from others among at least 21 US victims in an international mystery unfolding in Cuba – which included brain swelling, dizziness, nausea, severe headaches, balance problems and tinnitus. The top US diplomat has called them "health attacks". At least some of the incidents were confined to specific rooms or even parts of rooms with laser-like specificity, baffling US officials who say the facts and the physics don't add up. Suspicion initially focused on a sonic weapon, and on the Cubans. Yet the diagnosis of mild brain injury, considered unlikely to result from sound, has confounded investigators. Some victims now have problems concentrating or recalling specific words, the latest sign of more serious damage than initially realised.

The US first acknowledged the attacks in August, nine months after symptoms were first reported. Several of those affected were recent arrivals at the embassy, which reopened in 2015 as part of President Obama's re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba's Marxist regime. Almost nothing about what went down in Havana is clear. Investigators have tested several theories about an intentional attack: by Cuba's government, a rogue faction of its security forces, or a third country such as Russia. Could an advanced espionage operation have gone horribly awry?

In several episodes, victims knew it was happening in real time, and there were strong indications of a sonic attack. Some felt vibrations, and heard sounds – loud ringing or a high-pitch chirping similar to crickets or cicadas. Others heard the grinding noise. Some victims awoke with ringing in their ears and fumbled for their alarm clocks, only to discover the ringing stopped when they moved away from their beds. The attacks seemed to come at night. Several victims reported they came in minute-long bursts. Yet others heard nothing, felt nothing. Later, their symptoms came.

Even the potential motive is unclear, as Canadian diplomats were harmed as well, including some who reported nosebleeds. Targeted, localised sound beams are possible, but the laws of acoustics suggest such a device would probably be large and not easily concealed. No single, sonic gadget seems to explain such an odd, inconsistent array of physical responses. "Brain damage and concussions, it's not possible," said Joseph Pompei, a psychoacoustics expert. "Somebody would have to submerge their head in a pool lined with very powerful ultrasound transducers."

In May, Washington expelled two diplomats from Cuba to protest the communist government's failure to protect Americans serving there, but hasn't accused Havana of perpetrating the attacks. The Cuban government has denied any involvement, but the US is considering closing the embassy. *<i> 11 Aug; Guardian, 11 Aug, (online), 15 Sept; D.Telegraph, 12+24+26 Aug; iflscience.com, 22 Aug; [R] 26 Aug 2017.* For a feature on sonic warfare, see **FT153:30**; and on acoustic cannons used for crowd control, see **FT259:8**.

KARL SHUKER welcomes back a long-lost monkey and rediscovers a missing photograph

CHRISTINA SELBY

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ABOVE LEFT: Vanzolini's saki – rediscovered after 80 years. **ABOVE RIGHT**: The photograph of Cubanacan, a litigon that once lived in Alipore Zoo.

SEEKING A SAKI

On 29 October 1936, Ecuadorian naturalist Alfonso M Olalla collected a single specimen of an unfamiliar-looking monkey along western Brazil's Eiru River. Subsequently named Vanzolini's saki in honour of the Brazilian zoologist Dr Paulo Vanzolini, this black-furred, cat-sized primate with golden limbs and long fluffy tail was originally classified as a subspecies of Gray's bald-faced saki *Pithecia irrorata*, but in July 2014, as part of a major revision of saki taxonomy, primatologist Dr Laura K Marsh elevated it to the status of a distinct species in its own right, as *P. vanzolinii*. Having said that, such taxonomic matters seemed at the time to be of academic interest only, because no living specimen had been recorded since Olalla's sole representative almost 80 years previously. A few dead specimens had come to light during a survey made in 1956, but nothing of recent date. Consequently, at least as far as the more pessimistic primatologists were concerned, this monkey was extinct.

Someone who hoped otherwise, however, was Dr Marsh, who on 1 February 2017 launched a three-month-long expedition, Houseboat Amazon, to seek out Vanzolini's vanished saki, travelling along the southern tributaries of the Juruá River (including Eiru) in Brazil's Amazonas state and west from the Tarauacá River to the western side of the Liberdade River. Happily, their search swiftly proved successful, spotting a very exuberant example of this long-lost species on only the fourth day, leaping energetically from branch to branch in a tree by the Eiru River, and others were subsequently spied throughout the course of their journey. Worryingly, however, this newly-rediscovered species's known distribution range is close to an area of deforestation, and, coupled with the ever-present threat from hunting, it is therefore very vulnerable to being wiped out in the not-too-distant future, unless effective, enforceable conservation measures are swiftly set in place.

https://news.mongabay.com/2017/08/monkey-rediscovered-in-brazil-after-80-years/ 9 Aug 2017.

CUBANACAN IN COLOUR

One of cryptozoology's most controversial – and definitely most tantalising – subjects is the possible existence of an old photograph supposedly depicting a dead specimen of a giant North American thunderbird pinned to a barn door with wings extended and with various persons standing close by. This photo has allegedly been seen by numerous people, usually in some unnamed magazine or book, but despite many searches has never been found, leading certain cryptozoological researchers to the conclusion that it doesn't exist, and that the memories of those claiming to have seen it are false ones, unconsciously inspired by having observed superficially similar photos but of known species.

Conversely, there are other, more optimistic researchers who believe that this so-called 'lost thunderbird photograph' may exist somewhere, but hasn't been sought in the correct place. A recent experience of my own demonstrates that the latter scenario is by no means unlikely. On 22 May 2017, I brought to the attention of celebrated Indian naturalist Shubhobroto S Ghosh – currently Wildlife Project Manager of World Animal Protection in India – a colour photograph hitherto deemed long-lost that depicts a truly extraordinary hybrid big cat. The cat in question is Cubanacan, a male litigon (or li-tigon) – the progeny of a lion and a female tigon (tiger x lioness hybrid), shown fully-grown in the rediscovered photo. He was born at Alipore Zoo in Kolkata, India, on 7 March 1979, the only surviving cub of his litter of three.

Cubanacan was also once the world's largest big cat in captivity, which, according to an entry in the 1985 edition of the *Guinness Book of Records*, weighed 363kg (800lb), stood 1.32m (4ft 4in) at the shoulder, and measured 3.5m (11.5ft) in length. Moreover, it was in that particular edition that I had rediscovered the photograph (credited there to Calcutta Zoo, i.e. Alipore Zoo), whose reproduction in it had apparently not been known about by other researchers seeking any existing Cubanacan images (this may be due to the photo seemingly appearing only in this one edition, for 1985, not in any of those for earlier or later years), and which was not even present in the archives of its originator, Alipore Zoo. This unique rediscovered photograph of Cubanacan, the only known colour example, has now appeared in a major new article published online by *Nature India*. Authored by myself and Shubhobroto, it constitutes both the most comprehensive and the most extensively illustrated account of Cubanacan's history ever produced.

http://blogs.nature.com/indigenus/2017/08/nature-india-photo-story-cubanacan-the-litigon.html?WT.mc_id=FBK_NPG 1 Aug 2017.

FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

Disputed origins of the Universe, living foaftales, Bosco's brain recovered and breatharian dieting

MICHELLY RALL / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Professor Neil Turok with a sculpture of his friend Stephen Hawking – the Big Bounce versus the Big Bang.

ALTERNATIVE ASTRONOMY [FT204:14]

Professor Neil Turok, director of the Perimeter Institute of Theoretic Physics in Canada, has long questioned his close friend Stephen Hawking's vision of the Big Bang, when space, time and matter are thought to have burst into existence. He has now published research suggesting the basic maths behind Hawking's views is incorrect and that science must rethink the origins of the Universe. "Our research implies that we either should look for another picture to understand the very early Universe, or that we have to rethink the most elementary models of quantum gravity," said Job Feldbrugge, one if Turok's co-authors.

Hawking's views date back to the 1980s when he and James Hartle published mathematical research suggesting that the Universe emerged smoothly from an infinitesimally small point. However, in a paper entitled "No Smooth Beginning for Spacetime", Turok has re-examined Hawking's work to show that the energies within such a Universe would be so wild and fluctuating that it would immediately destroy itself. Turok said the maths he used was not around when Hawking produced his theories, and offered a new hypothesis: "the Big Bounce". This suggests the Universe is locked in a perpetual cycle of big bangs in which it expands then contracts to a tiny point before exploding outwards.

While Hawking disagrees, a model of the Universe "breathing" in and out seems more aesthetically pleasing than a single act of creation, and in tune with Vedantic cosmology. It is also the conclusion of the mathematician Roger Penrose in his *Cycles of Time: An Extraordinary New View of the Universe* (2010): for him, the Big Bang is both the end of one æon and the beginning of another in an Escheresque endless cycling of time.

Though it was Fred Hoyle – a believer in a 'steady state' Universe – who first coined the contemptuous term "Big Bang", the idea was not new. It appeared, for instance, in a commentary on the Torah by the leading Jewish scholar and kabbalist Nachmanides (1194-1270). "At the briefest instant following creation," he wrote, "all the matter of the Universe was concentrated in a very small space, no larger than a grain of mustard. The matter at this time was so thin, so intangible that it did not have real substance. It did, however, have a potential to gain substance and form and to become tangible matter. From the initial concentration of this intangible substance in its minute location, the substance expanded, expanding the Universe as it did so… From this initial act of creation, from this ethereally thin pseudo-substance, everything that has existed, or will ever exist, was, is, and will be formed." In his *Genesis and the Big Bang* (1990), Dr Gerald Schroeder, a former professor of nuclear physics, states that Nachmanides not only understood Big Bang theory, but also accurately calculated it to 15 billion years ago. Nachmanides wrote: "From the moment that matter formed from substanceless substance, time grabbed hold." *Guardian, 16 Oct, D.Mail, 4 Dec 2010; Sunday Times, 25 June 2017.*

> *"All the matter of the Universe was concentrated in a very small space"*

MEET THE WIFE [FT156:8]

A 54-year-old man who booked a prostitute online got a shock when his wife, 48, arrived at his hotel room in South Carolina. A row broke out and the man was arrested. (*Metro, 20 July 2017*). A 52-year-old man in Elgin, Illinois, who booked a prostitute though a website was shocked when the woman who turned up was his wife of 19 years. His wife is 43, but in a statement to the authorities, the man said he only saw the "27-year-old" woman's profile from her neck down. (*D.Mirror, 19 Aug 2017*). This is an old favourite of urban folklore; the cross-reference above gives four 2001 news reports of the same situation, set in China, Italy, Germany and Czechoslovakia.

For variations on the theme from 1989-90, set in Israel, Norway, Australia and Italy, see **FT58:17, 66:15**. Locations are always given and in the earlier examples actual names of protagonists. Of course, some of these reports could be true; that's the joy of foaftales. Maybe this one from 1989: Tel Aviv dentist Jacob Beisvitz rang a call-girl agency because he was lonely and was flabbergasted when his wife Rachel, 27, turned up. She was equally shocked and beat a hasty retreat from the hotel. The couple, who had two children, saw each other again in the divorce court.

RELIC THEFT [FT343:11]

On 2 June, thieves made off with a fragment of the brain of Saint John Bosco, popularly known as Don Bosco. The cerebral relic was stolen from behind the main altar in the basilica at Castelnuovo Don Bosco, a small town near Turin named after Giovanni Bosco, who was born there in 1815 and died in Turin in 1888. He devoted his life to helping deprived children, and in 1859 founded the Society of St Francis de Sales, better known as the Salesians or Salesians of Don Bosco, to help the poor and homeless children during the Industrial Revolution. The religious order has grown to become the second-largest order in the Catholic Church and now run schools and other organisations in as many as 90 countries. Don Bosco was canonised in 1934 under Pope Pius XI.

The relic had been housed in a small chapel built on the exact spot where the saint was born. The thief vaulted over a barrier and made off with the glass phial and a decorative bronze case it was kept in. It was the second time a relic of Don Bosco has been stolen. In 2011, a small bone reputedly from one of the saint's hands was stolen from a church in the town of Alassio. Other recent relic thefts include portions of the 'True Cross' taken from Holy Cross Abbey in Thurles, Co Tipperary, in 2011, and later recovered [**FT286:20**]; the preserved heart of St Laurence O'Toole, Dublin's patron saint, stolen in 2012 from the city's cathedral [**FT288:14**]; and a vial of blood from Pope John Paul II, taken in 2014 from a chapel near L'Aquila in central Italy [**FT343:11**].

Luckily for the police, the thief had left his fingerprints in the Castelnuovo basilica, and was identified as a 42-year-old criminal from Pinerolo, near Turin. The glass phial containing the brain segment, its wax seal unbroken, was found concealed in a copper kettle in a kitchen cabinet, but there was no sign of the case – suggesting that that was what he had really been after, and that he had sold it. *Catholic Herald, 5 June; D.Telegraph, 5+17 June; Live Science, 6 June; Times, 17 June 2017.*

LIVING ON LIGHT [FT313:14]

Every year, *Australian Skeptic* magazine awards the Bent Spoon to the "perpetrator of the most preposterous piece of paranormal piffle". Back in 2000, this prestigious award went to Jasmuheen (aka Ellen Greve, a former financial consultant from Queensland), a 'breatharian' who maintains that a person can survive on "pranic energy" from the Universe rather than food. Seventeen years later, she continues to promote her dangerous non-diet. At least four readers of her book, *Living on Light*, have starved themselves to death, including Verity Linn, 49, who died in the Scottish Highlands in 1999. Jasmuheen says she is studying how traditional Chinese Qigong masters live by prana (life force) alone. She claims that her 2018 darkroom retreats in Thailand are fully booked. Attendees live in the dark in silence and are given only water and juice for nine days and nights. Her website advises followers to steer clear of rival retreats that offer food. "Self mastery is key, so there is no leader in this field, just individuals experimenting and sharing their discoveries," she said. "Nearly 60,000 people now have this freedom."

In the 1980s, breatharianism was promoted by Wiley Brooks, a former New York sound engineer who worked with Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin. "Food is more addictive than heroin," he would tell his followers. He claimed to have fasted for 19 years, but in 1983 he was caught sneaking into a hotel and ordering a chicken pie [**FT40:23**]. *(Queensland) Courier Mail, 16 July; (Queensland) Sunday Mail, 23 July 2017.* See also **FT120:14, 129:9**.

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

217: ST BERNARD'S BRANDY

The myth

If you're lost in the western Alps, look out for the big dog with the little barrel of brandy round his neck. He's come to rescue you, complete with a wee tipple to keep the cold out.

The "truth"

St Bernard rescue dogs never did carry brandy barrels on their mercy missions. If you're suffering from hypothermia, the last thing you need is a slug of spirits to expand your blood vessels, thus accelerating the loss of heat from your skin surface. Originally known as "Barry Dogs", these extraordinary creatures were bred by monks who ran two travellers' hospices in notoriously dangerous passes across the Alps. The dogs' large build and resistance to low temperatures, along with superb tracking abilities, made them ideal for finding people who were lost, or even buried under snow. They generally worked in pairs; one dog would stay with the victim, providing warmth from its huge body, while its partner went off to fetch human rescuers. They saved many hundreds of lives, principally in the 18th and 19th centuries; today the rescues are carried out by helicopter, but the St Bernards are still around as tourist attractions – usually with kegs round their necks. The keg seems to have been invented, as a piece of whimsy, by the British animal painter, Edwin Landseer (1802-73). Incidentally, the dogs were apparently untrained by humans. They trained each other.

Sources

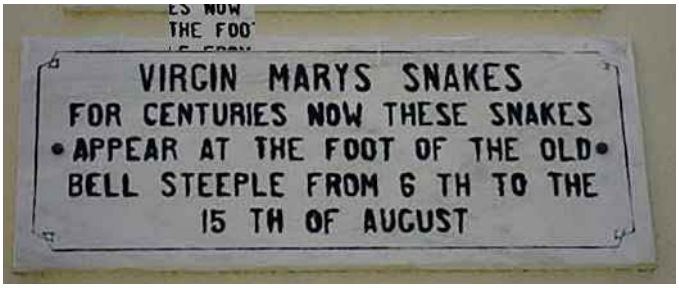
www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/a-brief-history-of-the-st-bernard-rescue-dog-13787665/; www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/hypothermia/symptoms-causes/dxc-20318121; https://saintbernardclub.org/history-and-breed-standard/history-of-the-breed; www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/activityandadventure/5342916/Hiking-through-the-St-Bernard-Pass.html; www.thekennelclub.org.uk/services/public/breed/display.aspx?id=5138

Disclaimer

Or *did* the dogs at one time carry booze, when perhaps its dangers were less understood? Was Landseer's barrel based on local folk memory? If you have further details, and you're in a fit state to share them, please write to the letters page.

ANIMAL MAGIC

Greek snakes worship the BVM, Malaysian emergency services capture record-breaking python, plus the calf that looks like Gene Simmons


VIRGIN MARYS SNAKES
FOR CENTURIES NOW THESE SNAKES
APPEAR AT THE FOOT OF THE OLD
BELL STEEPLE FROM 6 TH TO THE
15 TH OF AUGUST

VIRGIN OF THE SNAKES

Every year, on the Orthodox feast of the Dormition (falling asleep) of the Theotokos, a monastery on a Greek island experiences a 'miracle' – dozens of snakes come to 'venerate' an icon of Mary. In a phenomenon that has reportedly been happening for hundreds of years, black snakes begin appearing on the Greek island of Kefalonia between 5 and 15 August, the days when the Greek Orthodox Church celebrates the dormition of the Theotokos (Mother of God). According to tradition, the miracle of the snakes began in 1705, when nuns of the monastery were about to be attacked by pirates. The nuns prayed fervently to the Virgin Mary, asking her to turn them into snakes and thus avoid capture. Another version of the story says the nuns prayed that the monastery be infested with snakes so as to scare away the pirates. Either way it happened, they were spared. Since then, the small black snakes, known as European Cat Snakes, appear every year just before the feast, and make their way to the walls and entryways of the church at Markopoulo to 'venerate' the silver icon of Mary known as the Panagia Fidousa, or the Virgin of the Snakes.

The snakes' patterning can produce a small black cross on their heads, interpreted as the sign of the Cross. In recent years, the faithful have taken to transporting snakes to the church in jars and bags, to protect them from being run over by unwitting motorists. The usually aggressive snakes are reportedly docile and calm during these days, when they are welcome in the church for Mass and prayers, and disappear from the island completely after the feast until the next year. Reportedly, the only years the snakes have not appeared on the island were during World War II, and in 1953, the year of a massive earthquake. Locals now take the lack of the snakes' appearance as a bad omen. Every year, the island celebrates the Theotokos and the miracle with a Snake Festival. *churchpop.com, 15 Aug 2017.*

LONGEST SNAKE EVER?

A huge python found on a construction site in Malaysia on 7 April 2016 might be the longest snake ever caught. The reticulated python – a species found in Southeast Asia and widely considered the longest reptile species – was spotted under a fallen tree where a flyover was being built in Paya Terubong on the island of Penang. Workers from the construction site called the emergency services and it took 30 minutes to trap. "It is eight metres [26ft] long and weighs about 250kg [550lb]," said Herme Herisyam from Penang's Civil Defence Department. It took 14 men to hold it for a photograph. It was due to be transferred to the Department of Wildlife, but sadly it died on 10 April after laying eggs, possibly from stress.

The 2011 edition of the *Guinness Book of World Records* claims that the longest snake ever held in captivity is Medusa, a reticulated python kept on show at "The Edge of Hell Haunted House" in Kansas City, Missouri. She is 7.67m (25ft 2in) long and weighs 158.8kg (350lb), and was in danger of losing her title before the death of the Malaysian specimen. Before Medusa, the previous record holder was Fluffy, a 7.3m (24ft) python that died in 2010 aged 18. Reticulated pythons are normally 3-6m (10-20ft) long and can be found in water. Longer snakes could be living in the wild: in 1912, a python found and shot in Indonesia was reportedly 10m (33ft) long. *BBC News, theguardian.com, 11 April; Sun, 12 April 2016.*

ILLUSTRATED ANIMALS

TOP LEFT: Rescue dog Lucy was born with markings that look like a mirror image of herself on her left ear. Lucy (seen here aged eight months) was one of a litter delivered at Lollypop Farm, a rescue centre in New York, and was adopted by New York students Cassidy Troy and Zach Johnson. *D.Telegraph, 24 June 2017.*

TOP RIGHT: The hood of a venomous Indian cobra with its deceptive smiley face, photographed by Souvik Basu in Cooch Behar, West Bengal. *Metro, 8 Aug 2017*.

CENTRE LEFT: The unusual markings on this cat make it appear to be giving another cat a piggy-back. Dubbed 'Metacat', the unusual moggy has taken social media by storm, drawing comparisons with the reality-bending films *The Matrix* and *Inception*. One poster, called 'Steve is Damaged', sounded a warning note: "Metacat is here to rule us all twice as hard as a non-meta-cat could". *D.Express, 31 Aug; D.Mail, 1 Sept 2017.*

CENTRE RIGHT: This kitten with the shape of another black cat beneath its nose was spotted by a man in Japan among a group of feral animals living on wasteland. He shared a picture of it on Twitter. *D.Mail, 26 July 2017*.

LEFT: This calf was born on a ranch near Kerrville, Texas, on 28 July, with face markings resembling the striking stage makeup of KISS bass player Gene Simmons. Three days later, Simmons tweeted his admiration for the calf, which had been named Genie in his honour. Heather Taccetta, who lives at the ranch with her family, said Genie would be kept as a pet and not sold for slaughter. *[AP] 1 Aug 2017.*

CATERS NEWS

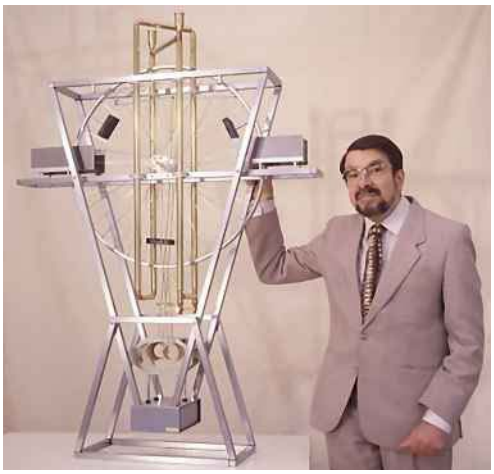
SOUVIK BASU / CATERS NEWS

TWITTER / @TOKAITRICK_BOT

GEORGE DE SOTA / LIAISON / GETTY IMAGES

NECROLOG

This month, we mark the passing of a scientific joker whose mad schemes kept coming true and the US Army General who believed he could walk through walls.



DAVID JONES

Dr David Jones was better known by his *nom de plume* Dædalus, the court jester in the palace of science. He was an organic chemist by training and his alter ego, the fictional inventor for DREADCO (Dædalus Research Evaluation and Development Corp), specialised in stretching the limits of science. The "Dædalus" column began in *New Scientist* in 1964 and transferred to *Nature* in the 1980s, and Jones produced almost 1,900 columns before Dædalus retired in 2002, the year after he lectured at the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony about the columns which, he said, navigated "a region of scientific humour whose appeal lay in its closeness to reality."

A typical piece would start with something everybody knew, and finish with something nobody could believe. Big cities, Dædalus observed, are full of litter and graffiti; meanwhile scientists have developed catalytic surfaces that make oven walls self-cleaning. And could breakthroughs in molecular biology not be applied to artificially accelerate the aging process of incarcerated convicts, shortening their mandated sentences and saving money on prisons?

His ideas for a nuclear-powered pogo stick and a black-hole rubbish disposal appliance were far-fetched, but some of his proposals proved prescient. In 1966 he suggested that scientists could stimulate the lattice-like bonds of carbon atoms in graphite to form hollow balls. In 1985, scientists actually synthesised something like them as buckminsterfullerene molecules – work that earned them the 1996 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. In the 1960s, Jones envisioned a chemically powered laser that two decades later would become a crucial component of Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative. Jones also experimented with whether plantlike forms could grow without gravity, putting them in a liquid solution of metal salt crystals and sodium silicate, known as a chemical garden. A prototype was sent into space, and complex forms did in fact develop.

Possibly with half an eye on the Templeton Prize ("for progress toward research or discoveries about spiritual realities"), Dædalus proposed experiments exploring the molecular basis of religious experience. This involved carrying out brain scans on monks and nuns at prayer, identifying the brain regions associated with a sense of contact with God, then synthesising the relevant molecules into "Theological Prozac" which would bestow spiritual comfort on users, "unaccompanied by the stern orthodox convictions attached to it by the more doctrinal aspects of religion."

Getting goose bumps from chilling spectral apparitions could be explained by his theory that the spirit world is colder than the material one – the latter having been warmed by cosmic radiation from the Big Bang. Therefore, he posited, rambunctious ghosts could be thermodynamically exorcised by exposing them to an open microwave oven. He even concocted a fanciful means of measuring the speed, spin and direction of a human soul, both when it leaves the body at death ("Traditional theology, perhaps, predicts that the soul of a sinner would depart downward, and would weigh less than that of a righteous believer") and before birth ("If the soul turns out to enter the fœtus quite late in pregnancy, the religious arguments against contraception and early abortion will be neatly disproved").

In the early 1980s, Jones began exhibiting a series of "perpetual motion" machines at museums and trade shows. Beautifully made out of bicycle wheels, sewing machine parts, plumbing hardware and other bits and pieces, and housed in glass cases with no obvious means of energy input, the wheels would slowly turn over periods of a year or more, seemingly in defiance of physical laws. In fact, Dædalus machines had a concealed driving mechanism, but their main feature was "cunning distractions, each designed to lead the scientific mind along one or other of several false trails". To his amusement, many fell for it. Engineers thought that he really had discovered the secret of perpetual motion, while physicists proposed methods of deception that couldn't possibly work. One machine is still going.

"Dædalus never flagrantly posits impossibilities," said Jones. "Ideally, his fancies are ingenious, novel and even crazy, but they mustn't break natural laws. On the other hand, somewhere along the line, they do run off the rails." Still, he wrote in *The Aha! Moment: A Scientist's Take on Creativity* (2011), "Despite my best endeavours, these mad Dædalian schemes kept coming true on me." He estimated that as many as 20 per cent of his "fancies" turned out to be valid, "one way or the other."

David Edward Hugh Jones, aka Dædalus, chemist and columnist, born Southwark, London 20 April 1938; died Newcastle upon Tyne 20 July 2017, aged 79.

ALBERT STUBBLEBINE III

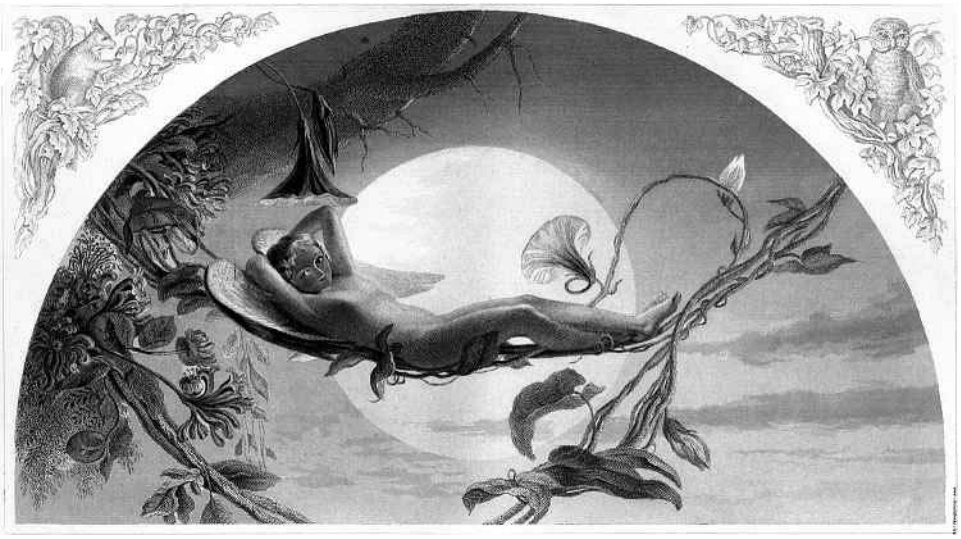
This US soldier was a key character in *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (2004), Jon Ronson's bestseller about psychic spying, which in 2009 was made into a film of the same name. In 1981 Stubblebine, a Vietnam veteran who had been serving as head of the Electronics Research and Development Command (Eradcom), became the commanding officer of Inscom, the Army's Intelligence and Security Command. Inscom had encouraged officers such as Colonel Jim Channon, who in 1979 established the "First Earth Battalion" at Fort Knox. Channon's aim was to create a cadre of "warrior monks", soldiers who would go to war to the sound of New Age music carrying "symbolic animals" such as lambs. Once in hostile territory they would greet people with "sparkly eyes" and give the enemy "an automatic hug". With 16,000 soldiers under his command, Stubblebine was instrumental in the invasions of Panama and Granada. He was said to have attempted psychic spying on Anastasio Samoza, which the

Nicaraguan dictator allegedly countered by putting paper strips in his shoes.

Stubblebine sponsored the "Stargate" project, a secret Army unit established at Fort Meade, Maryland, to investigate the potential for psychic techniques in military and domestic intelligence applications. He was nicknamed "spoonbender" after being deeply impressed by Uri Geller's spoon-bending skills. He set up a special psychic spying unit, whose members would engage in "remote viewing", a technique which involved sitting in a hut waiting for sudden psychic flashes that might show, for example, the design of a Russian warship or the location of an enemy general. He was a frequent visitor to the Monroe Institute, a privately owner centre for investigation into the paranormal near Charlottesville, Virginia, where a process known as "hemi-sync" was used to stimulate out-of-body experiences.

Stubblebine suggested that psychic healing could be used to treat wounds in the field, and that the Army should establish a clandestine animal heart-bursting programme, to test whether soldiers could cause goats (and by extension, enemy troops) to die using willpower alone. Shortly before Stubblebine was forced to retire in 1984, he became convinced that humans could walk through walls and levitate; but his own experiments proved unsuccessful. When he tried walking through walls, he kept bumping his nose, and when he tried to levitate, "I could not get my fat ass off the ground." Rima Laibow, Stubblebine's second wife, was a psychiatrist and nutrition campaigner who claimed to be a UFO abduction victim.

Major General Albert Newton Stubblebine III, US Army intelligence chief, born 6 Feb 1930; died 6 Feb 2017, aged 87.



Fairies, Folklore and Forteana

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

A very British bogeyman

Jack the Ripper is universally known, but not many have heard of 'Leather Apron', Jack's poorer, but more interesting, cousin. After the Annie Chapman murder (8 Sept 1888), East Enders talked not of the 'Ripper' (that name would be coined in October), but of 'Leather Apron'. Now the real Leather Apron was a shoemaker named Pizer: he was arrested and quickly released.

The Leather Apron that mattered, though, was the image that East Enders built up after the Chapman murder. That Leather Apron seemed closer to a demon than a human being; as one contemporary paper put it, "a fashionable goblin… the populace has constructed a something, half human and half fiendish, wherewith it is keeping itself in the delightful condition of hysterical nervousness". Leather Apron wore, naturally, a leather apron and carried a sharp leather knife. He had an "ugly grin" and "malignant eyes". He was "a marked Hebrew type" – "all are united in the belief that he is a Jew or of Jewish parentage". (There is a streak of Cockney anti-semitism: we perhaps even hear echoes of the blood libel.) He had, though, too, an 'uncanny' feature: "in moving about he never makes any noise – he moves noiselessly". Here we come to the supernatural Leather Apron and, indeed, the supernatural killer of the Whitechapel imagination. One witness claimed that she heard a victim screaming as she ran down the street, clearly pursued by someone: "and it struck me as very strange that I did not hear the sound of any footsteps whatever except hers".

> "IT STRUCK ME AS VERY STRANGE THAT I DID NOT HEAR THE SOUND OF ANY FOOTSTEPS WHATEVER EXCEPT HERS"

Already, then, before the second murder – this description dates to 6 September – the Whitechapel Murderer had become something not entirely human. From the autumn of 1888 there has been the idea, echoed particularly by academics, that Leather Apron was the creation of the press, not the people. But Leather Apron is remarkably similar to British bogeymen from elsewhere in the country and one journalist claimed at the time that "nowhere does grosser ignorance and superstition exist than in Whitechapel". By October, Leather Apron was even being called "Old Leather Apron", the prefix 'old' being one often applied to bogeymen in Britain. Of course, Leather Apron's time was, also, quickly running out. On 1 October the 'Dear Boss' letter was published signed 'Jack t[he] Ripper'. By 4 October a newspaper reports that Londoners pursuing a man whom they believed to be the killer called him alternately 'Leather Apron' and 'Jack the Ripper'. By 16 October a newspaper reported that the Ripper had now taken Leather Apron's place in popular affection.

Then, by November, a new bogeyman had struggled to his feet, one who is still with us: Jack, "a respectable gentleman with a black bag".

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Going mental

PETER BROOKESMITH surveys the latest fads and flaps from the world of ufological research

Early in September, Chris Rutkowski, who's inherited the UFO UpDates Facebook page from the late Errol Bruce-Knapp, put up an invitation there as follows: "There's been considerable talk about contactee conversations with aliens, whether by telepathic messages, automatic writing or flashes of light in the night sky. Describe a viable scientific experiment or test that could help prove such communication is real."

A couple of days before that, *FT* co-founder Paul Sieveking forwarded me a message from one Paul Roberts, headed "The Psychic Power to Uncloak UFOs". On the one hand we have an enquiring mind wondering if aliens really are reaching out to us psychically; on the other we have an account of a mind psychically unmasking the presence of alien craft. Worth discussing together, I thought.

Mr Roberts and his wife Deanna Jaxine Stinson are the movers behind Halo Paranormal Investigations, based in Sacramento, California, and describe themselves as "esoteric detectives" who "go on ghost hunts and supernatural adventures". You can read more about them and their fascinating lives at www.cryptic916.com. On 5 September this year the couple were in Elk Grove, CA, when Deanna "gets the impulse to snap a photo and in her photo she captures 3 UFOs in V formation." Neither saw any UFOs in the sky before the impulse descended on Deanna, but there are three lights in the sky in the photo (see above), just above a pink globe that may be the setting or rising Moon. This is all we know so far about this particular event. But Deanna, says Paul, "has proven to me that she can feel a UFO or even a portal in the sky and take a photo and the UFO will appear in the photo. In one photo, she actually captured a portal in the sky over Copperopolis, CA", while "in Grass Valley, Deanna connected to the UFOs by using two crystal skulls. She asked the UFO to 'power up' and that is exactly what the UFO did and was witnessed by other investigators and spectators." It has to be said that they don't exactly help their case by adducing Ed 'Gulf Breeze' Walters and Eduard 'Billy' Meier as other claimed 'uncloakers' of UFOs, even if they do admit these two have been pronounced hoaxers. I'll leave others to hunt down the lens reflections, or whatever.

Reaching out to UFOs may be in the mind (or lens) of the beholder, but that's also true of supposed ETs who reach out to us. Responders to Chris Rutkowski's appeal variously remarked that one should first prove aliens exist, that "If there is something that we can probe scientifically we would have one fact. So [far] we don't have one yet", and that "If they passed the test, we still don't know the 'who' [is] passing the test. Could just be a crazy uncle, bored in the afterlife, playing a prank." Mike Jamieson telegraphed: "If channeler, using trance induction, have sealed envelope with contents not known by you, and require channeled entity to identify it" – a standard test in telepathy experiments. That looked like somewhere to start. But then Bruce Maccabee gave a link to his account of his amazing dealings with no less than *le plus grand fromage* of channelled ETs, Ashtar himself (http://brumac.mysite.com/ashtar.html). Maccabee devised a fair test of its validity, which made me wonder if a variation on that combined with a version of Jamieson's idea wouldn't be better still.

FACEBOOK

Dr Maccabee had a friend who was into yoga and meditation and wasn't a UFO buff. One day in autumn 1988, out of the blue, she had a message from Ashtar, instructing her to "tell Bruce Maccabee to stay out of his way, not to try to stop him. He wants all the godless souls. The lost souls who do not meditate or pray will go aboard his spaceships all over the world when he is ready for them to come and colonize his star-planets. They will think they are escaping death through the destruction of earth planet." The message ended: "If he cooperates with us rather than fights us, he can have whatever he wants. Otherwise we will ruin him."

Somewhat bemused and a trifle disturbed, Dr Maccabee happened upon another medium who worked through "automatic typing". In early 1989, through a third party, he posed a question for her to ask: "Has Dr. Maccabee been sent a message from Ashtar (through a medium) recently, and if so, could you repeat the message?" The response: "Greetings Commander Maccabee, in the Light of Our Most Radiant One. I come through this dedicated channel this evening to assure that the words that you have received are indeed incomplete and that more information is coming. I, Ashtar do greet you with all of the respect that is deserving of your soul and rank, and do not hesitate to accept your hand in friendship, as is so often the case on the earth plane." There was much more (such as "in the separateness comes the separation"), the less cryptic bits being about Earth's "energies" and the misuse of weapons, and a gentle chiding "for not being sufficiently concerned 'to help the Beloved Terra take control of her own destiny.'" Not surprisingly, Dr Mccabee wondered if there was more than one Ashtar out there among the vibrations and dimensions.

Now, to answer Chris Rutkowski's invitation. Experimenter A writes a question for the ET entity of choice, and seals it in an impenetrable container. This is passed to Experimenter B, who doesn't know the nature of the question, and presents it to Channeller C, with the request to Entity D to respond. The answer having been had – and the answer should include at least a précis of the question – Experimenter B then presents the same, unopened container to Channeller E (who should be unknown to C), who requests a response from the same Entity D. The series can be repeated with as many channellers as one cares to find. The answers, not to mention the question, might be quite revealing. Naturally, my own candidates for questions are not suitable for publication in a journal intended for family reading.

Return to Oz

JENNY RANDLES asks whether experiments in time perception can shed light on close encounters

I recently finished helping a UFO witness tell his story in a book. It was fascinating to take someone's raw emotions and find ways to translate them onto the page. One experience involved the 'Oz Factor', a term I coined (after Frank Baum's stories) in 1983 to describe symptoms that occur when in proximity to a close encounter. A typical example involves a witness who, in May 1977, was overcome by a presentiment that reality was about to change. Moments later, all environmental sounds vanished: no bird song, no traffic. It was as if he were under a giant dome, sealed off from the rest of the Universe. Moreover, time had lost all meaning, as if everything was stretched out in a perpetual 'now'. Two green balls appeared in the sky, defying reality. As they vanished, he 'came to' and found himself holding on to what felt like fragments of a dream that was disappearing as he awoke.

The Oz Factor transforms a mundane sighting of a light in the sky into an experience of otherworldliness. It seems as if you touch the secrets of the Universe for a brief moment and then are snatched back into mundanity, no longer able to grasp the magic that was 'out there' somewhere.

The term 'Oz Factor' seemed to catch on, although this wider appreciation was not through my efforts, but mostly thanks to an American group who in 1996 wrote a song and titled their second studio album after the phenomenon. Unwritten Law's *Oz Factor* has a cover depicting the delightfully absurd states of mind that experiencers report: demons and aliens playing a game as the world crackles with lightning outside. I don't know if Unwritten Law's lyrics relate to my Oz Factor by accident or design, but they reveal an awareness of what the experience is about. "Look to the sky at night and dream" seems a poetic address to any close encounter witness, while a "fine line between what's known and what's unseen" is apt, and the chorus evokes the feeling of "My feet are on the ground, my head's up in the clouds".

Regardless of why these words were written, they seem to reflect a groundswell of collective consciousness – perhaps in the context of Rupert Sheldrake's Morphic Resonance, where an idea ripples through the wider global being when the time is right. I wondered, therefore, what scientists make of this state of consciousness today. Do they recognise that it exists? And what do they glean, based on an inevitable focus on biological origins? To a degree, it seems they do know about the Oz Factor, though it is neither officially named nor viewed as one

phenomenon. But some use the term 'The Zone' with reference to peak concentration by athletes who focus entirely on an event and exclude all intrusive elements of reality; it is perceived as a filtering out of external interference as a way to process only vital data. Accident victims, such as those in car crashes, have also been studied because there are documented cases of them perceiving time stretching out and slowing down as if to give the person at risk more time to react. There is no agreement on how 'real' this extra time is, but data suggest that varying perception of time postdates our ability to travel fast. There are no such accounts from horse and cart accidents.

Experimental study of how we perceive the passage of time in this way has led to interesting findings. Since the dawn of television 80 years ago it has been known that the brain can adjust to receiving not entirely synchronised sound and vision signals because it processes them at different paces; there is a 100-millisecond gap that it closes up to create an illusion of simultaneity. Indeed, the brain is constantly creating differing perceptions of time passage because of how a range of neurones and clusters construct our overall individual sensation from many different inputs. This partly explains why we measure short and long periods of time differently. Our brains tend to overestimate short periods to compensate and underestimate longer ones. Experiments in time judgement show a 10-second event is likely to be perceived to have lasted longer, whereas a 10-hour event will be judged to have lasted for less than it actually did. This might be relevant to the way in which time stretches out during the Oz Factor experience of a fortean event.

Some scientists think we uniquely create our own time reality as a personal constant, rather than it being a fundamental of the Universe. But American neuroscientist David Eagleman seems to have disproven that idea with an intriguing experiment. He strapped sensitive computer calculators to people's wrists as they were dropped safely in freefall. They all said that the 'rush' of the fall put them in the 'zone' and, as a result, more time passed for them as they fell than was observed to pass by those outside the experiment. So, which measure was 'real'?

The time-measured electronic inputs made while the subjects fell did not increase in number as they should have done if more time had passed for the fallers. Eagleman concludes that the perception of time stretching out was only an interpretation by their brains and not an actual reality. It was reconstructed afterwards by their minds to feel as if more time had passed. Eagleman thinks that as they fell, their senses, having more to decode, went into overdrive and the brain later assumed that more time must have passed for all of this normally disregarded data to have been received along with that normally downloaded to sensory input. Senses in overload led to greater data storage, wrongly recorded in the brain as requiring a longer time to have happened.

Another related and interesting set of experiments was published by the Association of Psychological Science, where three women led by Melanie Rudd demonstrated that an event that stimulates awe within the mind creates a widening of mental horizons that provide the brain with more space to fill. When it does fill up with these multiple experiences, we subsequently interpret that as meaning more time must have passed. But it was not more time passing, but the brain opening up its sensory detection net in response to an extreme stimulus. So in an experience that evokes awe – which a close encounter surely does – we will believe more time has passed than actually has elapsed; and we might struggle to wonder what happened to cause this discontinuity if, for instance, we lose consciousness as a consequence of the encounter. Perhaps we then later seek to fill that gap with missing memories of events that might not have actually occurred because the time we think passed when they were happening never did.

This research may provide a route towards understanding the 'time lapse' effect in close encounters that often inspires abductees to seek regression hypnosis looking for memories they think they cannot recall – memories that might not exist at all.

In Search of Witch Bottles

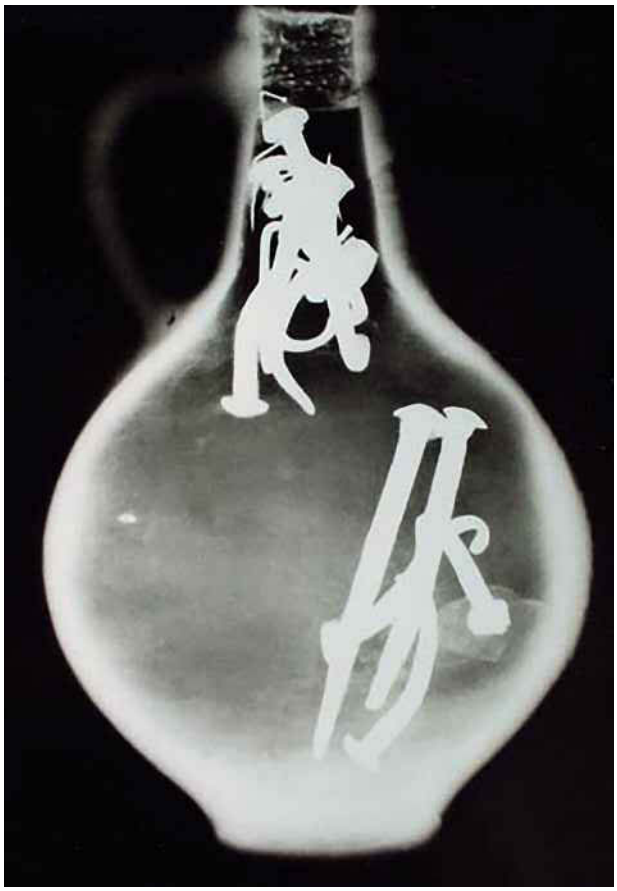
Many ghost stories are based around an archæologist who discovers an item associated with supernatural beliefs. One group of finds with such links are Bellarmine witch bottles, 17th century stoneware jugs prepared to repel witchcraft. **ROBERT HALLIDAY** investigates.

In 2004, workmen in Greenwich in southeast London found a Bellarmine jug buried five feet (1.5m) below the ground, with a crude face on the spout indicating late 17th century manufacture (see **FT255:16**). This was identified as a witch bottle since eight bent brass pins and 12 iron nails (one piercing a piece of leather) were lodged in the neck (suggesting it had been buried upside down). Also containing fingernail parings and strands of human hair, it was half-filled with liquid that was "unequivocally human urine"; it contained contine, a nicotine product, showing it was passed by a tobacco smoker. [1]

Witch bottles applied principles of sympathetic magic. Waste substances eliminated from the body, being personal and important to health, can be used in magic and counter-magic. In 1671 Joseph Blagrave's *Astrological Practice of Physicke* stated:

> *Another way [to counter evils of witchcraft] is to stop the urine of the patient, close it up in a bottle, and put into it three nails, pins or needles, with a little white salt, keeping the urine always warm: if you let it remain long in the bottle it will endanger the witch's life: for I have found by experience that they will be grievously tormented making their water with great difficulty, if at all, and the more if the moon be in Scorpio in square or opposition to his significator when it's done.* [2]

A witch bottle turned maleficence back onto a witch by making urination painful, or preventing it altogether. If buried, it made her waste away. If burst over a fire, it caused great pain; it was claimed this would make the witch come begging for mercy.



LEFT: An X-Ray of the Greenwich witch bottle revealing its contents. **FACING PAGE:** The bearded face on a Bellarmine: does this 'Bartmann' derive from the hairy, foliage covered wild man?

A witch bottle turned maleficence back onto a witch by making urination painful

Shakespeare's *Comedy Of Errors* satirises witchcraft beliefs: in act four, scene three, Dromio mentions items found in witch bottles:

Some devils ask but for the parings of one's nail,
A rush, a hair, a drop of blood, a pin.

At the trial of the Lowestoft witches Amy Denny and Rose Cullender in 1662, their alleged victims, Deborah and Elizabeth Pacy, claimed to have vomited bent pins and nails. Later cases included similar allegations (even if observers expressed scepticism). [3] Attribution of occult properties to bent metal has continued, as Uri Geller demonstrates.

Bellarmine Jugs were manufactured in Frechen near Cologne from the mid-16th century. In Germany, they are called *Bartmann*, meaning 'bearded man'. Many were exported to England: more have been found on archæological sites in the United Kingdom than in Germany. A recent theory holds that the face derived from the hairy, foliage covered 'wild man', well known to readers of *Fortean Times* (see **FT318:28-33** for example). Over the course of the 17th century these degenerated into rough caricatures: Bellarmine witch bottles display crude images, suggesting late 17th century manufacture. [4]

PINS AND NEEDLES... AND URINE

Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) was a prominent figure in the Roman Catholic Church. While he never enjoyed a sybaritic lifestyle, his name was applied to the jugs as a humourous allusion to a man in holy orders who enjoyed food and drink, like Friar Tuck. In 1634 William Cartwright's play *The Ordinary* compared a drunkard to a drinking vessel:

> *Thy belly looks like to some strutting hill*
> *O'ershadowed with thy rough beard like a wood.*
> *Or like a larger jug that some men call*
> *A Bellarmine.* [5]

Their use as anti-witchcraft agents was unique to England: there have been no comparable European finds. This may have been due to their resemblance to a bladder and the anthropomorphic faces. Witches were often portrayed with facial hair: in *Macbeth*, act one, scene three, Banquo tells the 'weird sisters':

> *You should be women,*
> *And yet your beards forbid me to interpret*
> *That you are so.*

In 1681, an account of a witch bottle was published in Joseph Glanvill's *Saducismus Triumphatus* (see **FT142:26**, **357:44-50**). A founder member of the Royal Society, and an early champion of René Descartes's philosophy, Joseph Glanvill produced *Saducismus Triumphatus* to prove that spiritual forces actively intervened in daily life, a belief shared by Isaac Newton.

William Brearley, a fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, and rector of Clipstone in Northamptonshire, told Glanvill how, as a young man, he boarded in a house in Suffolk. The landlady "had been a long time in a languishing condition, and... was haunted by a thing in the shape of a bird that would flurr (sic) near to her face and that she could not enjoy her natural rest well". The house was visited by "an old man that travelled up and down the country", who said this was a spirit of the dead. She should fill a bottle with pins, needles and nails, urinate into it, and seal it. She and her husband should heat the bottle in a fire until it burst. The heat made the stopper fly out of the bottle, and she got worse. The old man then advised them to bury the bottle and she returned to health. Afterwards another woman came saying they had killed her husband, a wizard (perhaps a 'cunning man') by returning his magic. [6]

Possibly the landlady suffered from a psychological condition and the preparation of the bottle provided a catharsis to relieve her mind; the wizard's death is more difficult to explain. But the veracity of the story is suspect, since Brearley was only told this several years after it was supposed to have happened, and more time passed before he communicated it to Glanvill, allowing the narrative to be embellished; and we are not told where in Suffolk it occurred, or the names of the participants.

Witch bottles are mentioned in witchcraft trials in 1682. Joan Butts of Ewell in Surrey was accused of bewitching Mary Farnborough to death. When Mary suffered "in an extraordinary manner" a "Dr Bourne" advised her parents that she was under "an ill tongue" and that they should save Mary's urine in a bottle and bury it in

Witch bottles are mentioned in English witchcraft trials in 1682

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

TOP: Nails and strands of hair recovered from the Greenwich witch bottle. **ABOVE:** A typical example of a 17th century glazed stoneware Bellarmine jug manufactured in Frechen, near Cologne.

the ground. Jane Kent, aged 60, was accused of tormenting the Chamblet family. When "Dr Ha—ks" of Spittlefields advised Mr Chamblet to boil some of his wife's hair and nail parings in a quart of her urine in "a pipkin", Jane Kent came screaming to his door. This year was marked by the last English witchcraft execution, at Bideford in Devon, but scepticism about witchcraft was increasing, and Joan Butts and Jane Kent were found not guilty. [7]

Jane Wenham of Walkern in Hertfordshire, the last person to be found guilty of witchcraft in an English court, was accused of bewitching Anne Thorn, a servant of the rector, in 1712 (see 'Twilight of the Witches', pp38-43 this issue). The rector's family "were advised to take some of the girl's [Anne's] urine, and put it into a stone-bottle, tie the cork down and let it over the fire, which they did… till the time that the bottle flew with report as great as that of a pistol."

Two men guarding Jane (already under arrest) testified that she displayed great pain at the time. Although this helped to convince the jury of Jane's guilt, the judge secured her a royal pardon; ultimately the case attracted so much hostile publicity that no further witchcraft trials were possible in England. [8]

A pamphlet recording Mary Phillips and Eleanor Shaw's execution for witchcraft at Northampton in 1705 has generally been dismissed as either a greatly embellished account of actual events, or wholly fictitious; but, even if treated as a work of fiction, it illustrates witchcraft beliefs. When Charles Ireland, aged 12, suffered from fits that were attributed to witchcraft, his mother filled a stoneware bottle with pins, needles and his urine, and buried it under the hearth of their house. [9]

A LOT OF BOTTLES

Early accounts do not give these specially prepared safeguards a specific name. The first instance of the term 'witch bottle' I have found occurred in 1870, at Saffron Walden in Essex, when a Bellarmine was found under the floor of a house, near the fireplace, containing 40 nails, 20 thorns and some liquid. [10] In 1914, another Bellarmine filled with clay and pins was identified as a witch bottle when it was uncovered in a fireplace in a cottage at Wennington near Huntingdon. Others were not recognised: in 1929, a builder at Rudgwick in Sussex said he and his father had been puzzled to find pottery jugs under hearths in houses. [11]

Suffolk, the setting for William Brearley's story (and the 1662 Lowestoft witchcraft case) produced 20 discoveries between 1944 and 1972. Twelve were found in houses: seven under hearths, three under floors and two under doors. Four were found in pubs: three under hearths. Ten contained phosphate from urine. Some contained broken glass, one contained a doll, possibly a witch's image. [12] I have found a record of another Suffolk discovery. In Sudbury, in

PHOTOS: ROBERT HALLIDAY

ABOVE: A Bellarmine witch bottle with its contents, Moyse's Hall Museum, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk.
LEFT: A Bellarmine witch bottle from Norwich Castle Museum, Norfolk, containing lead shot.

1873, eight Bellarmines were found under an old house being demolished. Seven were empty, one was corked and contained hair and liquid. In 2015, I lectured on ghosts to the Women's Institute at Burstall when a woman told me she once lived in a converted pub in nearby Hadleigh where a Bellarmine was found under the hearth: her family recognised it as a 'spirit bottle'. (As this was a private house confidentiality prevented her from revealing the address.) [13]

Since 1976 there have been discoveries elsewhere in southeast England. One under the hearth of a cottage in Hellington in Norfolk contained eight thorns, a pin with a hair tied to it, and fragments of a book inscribed with magical or zodiac signs. Another at Michelham Priory in Sussex (a monastery converted into a house) contained a human effigy. An inverted Bellarmine was found under the hearth of the *Elephant's Head* pub near Lamberhurst in Kent. At Abbots Ann in Hampshire four were found under the hearth of a house being demolished: two upright, containing hair; two inverted, containing bent bronze pins. In an old house in Felmersham in Bedfordshire a Bellarmine containing pins and human hair, which tested positive for urine, was found under the hearth. [14]

Those buried under houses may have protected the occupants at the central point (the hearth) or the entrance. Did pubs need special protection from witches, or were people who frequented pubs prone to prepare witch bottles? In the London area, 10 have been found in rivers, ditches, or buried on the edge of the early modern city (such as the Greenwich find), suggesting that here they were deposited in water or the city outskirts. [15] Being deposited underground or in houses has led to witch bottles' preservation and discovery. These may have been prepared to repel the

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ROBERT HALLIDAY

ABOVE: Bellarmine Witch Bottles, with contents of one example, in the Study Centre, Norwich Castle Museum. **FACING PAGE:** The author with witch bottle.

supposed maleficence of witches whose activities were never recorded.

Belief in the power of witch bottles developed just as the intellectual and legal establishment came to reject witchcraft beliefs. As it became difficult, and eventually impossible, to bring suspected witches to trial, these vessels provided those who believed in witchcraft with another method to alleviate their fears. In the 18th century, Bellarmine jugs were superseded by native-made stoneware and glass vessels. Preparation of witch bottles in other containers is worthy of further study.

While researching this article, I visited Norwich Castle Museum, where the Study Centre possesses four Bellarmine witch bottles from Norfolk: one contains 26oz (754g) of lead shot, possibly to shoot a witch. Adrian Marsden of the museum service said somebody once brought in a Bellarmine that was found under a hearth, just over the county border in Suffolk. On the day of discovery, the brother of the builder who found it broke his arm. This worried the owner of the house, who had it reburied with a little ceremony. Evidently witch bottles can still exert power over their finders.

NOTES

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6 Joseph Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus, or Full and Plain Evidence Concerning Witches, the Second Part, Proving the Real Existence of Apparitions, Spirits and Witches*, 1681, pp206-7.

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8 Francis Bragge, *A Full and Impartial Account of the Discovery of Sorcery and Witchcraft Practis'd by Jane Wenham of Walkerne*, E Curll, 1712, p20.

9 *An Account of the Tryals, Examinations and Condemnations of Elinor Shaw and Mary Phillips (Two Notorious Witches) at Northampton Assizes on Wednesday the 7 of March 1705*. In *Tracts, Chiefly Rare and Curious Reprints Relating to Northamptonshire*, Ralph Davis, 1876, pp4-5 (British Library, catalogue reference 10360.ff.33); Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonianism*, pp365-73, 381-4.

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13 *Bury And Norwich Post*, 3 June 1873, p6.

14 J Walker, 'A witch bottle from Hellington', *Norfolk Archæology* 40 (1987-8) pp113-4; J Bellam, 'The Bellarmine witch bottle and its contents, Michelham Priory, *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 128 (1990) 254-256; A Streeten, 'A Bellarmine bottle from Hook Green, Lamberhurst, *Archæologia Cantiana* 92 (1976) pp227-8; D Allen, 'Four Bellarmine stoneware witch bottles from Abbotts Ann, Hampshire in *Custom and Ceramics: Essays Presented to Kenneth Barton*, edited by Elizabeth Lewis, APE, 1991, pp147-156; Kenneth Shrimpton: *Felmersham, The History of a Riverside Parish*, published by the author, 2003, pp104-5.

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E Tilley, 'A witch bottle from Gravesend', *Archaeologia Cantiana* 80 (1965) pp252-6; C Maloney, 'A witch bottle from Duke's Place, Aldgate', *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society* 31 (1980) pp157-9; *Times*, 19 Mar 1954, p3; see also note one.

For a description of a witch bottle found in Reigate, Surrey, in 1993, see **FT142:26**, **144:51**.

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ROBERT HALLIDAY

Twilight of the Witches

The medical and legal professions transformed the way accusations of witchcraft were treated in the 19th century, but the old beliefs lingered on in rural areas – sometimes with fatal consequences. **DR JACOB MIDDLETON** explores the last days of the English witch.

Ann Tennant's death was no ordinary murder. It occurred on the main street of the peaceful village of Long Compton late one afternoon in the autumn of 1875. Tennant was walking home from the village shops when James Heywood (or Hayward), an agricultural labourer, ran up to her and struck her several times with his pitchfork. Restrained by horrified onlookers, Heywood defiantly defended his actions; according to him, Tennant was a witch. She had "set her eyes on him and possessed him" and thus deserved the harsh punishment he had inflicted upon her.[1]

LEFT: Elizabeth Sawyer of Winchmore Hill, convicted of witchcraft and executed in 1621.

The most surprising feature of Heywood's attack was that it only attracted widespread press attention because of Tennant's death. Even in the later years of the 19th century assaults on suspected witches were a surprisingly common occurrence in rural England. These attacks, known as witch-bleedings, were intended as a means of dispelling bewitchments, and robbing witches of their power. While the middle-class inhabitants of Victorian England liked to think of themselves as living in an era in which superstition had been consigned to the past, tales of rural witch-bleeding were a reminder that belief in magic remained common throughout much of the country; many people still believed that any misfortune they suffered might be the product of hostile magical forces.

THE LAST WITCH PERSECUTIONS

For much of the recorded history of the Western world the witch was a figure to be feared. In mediæval and early modern Europe, many people imagined themselves to be beleaguered by malevolent sorceries, called down upon their heads by hidden enemies within their communities. The belief in these magical threats would periodically erupt into persecution and violence, most notably in the 17th century, when a series of large scale witch-hunts erupted in Europe, leading to the executions of hundreds of supposed witches (see **FT198:30-36**).[2] The officially sanctioned persecution of witches began to subside in the early years of the 18th century in response to what were seen as the bloody excesses of earlier times. Whilst many educated people retained a belief in at least the theoretical possibility of witchcraft, growing judicial scepticism led authorities throughout Europe to treat any extraordinary claims of witchcraft with caution, demanding substantial evidence before proceeding to prosecute suspected witches.

James Heywood ran up to Ann Tennant and struck her several times with a pitchfork

The decline of witchcraft prosecutions in England is one indicator of the shifting legal approach. The final conviction of a person for witchcraft at an assize court was in 1712, when Jane Wenham was prosecuted in Hertfordshire. Wenham was pardoned and when, five years later, a woman named Jane Clerk was indicted for witchcraft, the case was dismissed.[3] This was followed, in 1736, by a repeal of the various statutes which had been used to prosecute witches; henceforth, one could only be prosecuted for *pretending* to be a witch, a firm statement of contemporary judicial and political feelings on the subject.[4]

Yet this legal shift did not represent a form of social progress, from the ignorance of the mediæval world to the enlightenment of the modern. The statutory changes were part of the move towards a practical and

bureaucratic system of law enforcement, which was emerging in the 18th century, and a refusal to prosecute witches was at least in part due to the judiciary redefining its purpose. That the state refused to prosecute women for their supposed involvement in witchcraft says little about the underlying metaphysical beliefs of either the population at large or of the educated classes of Britain. The people of the 18th century could believe that women such as Wenham and Clerk were the victims of prejudice and popular superstition, while retaining the notion that witchcraft remained possible, at least in principle.[5] The law might have changed, but popular beliefs had not necessarily shifted.

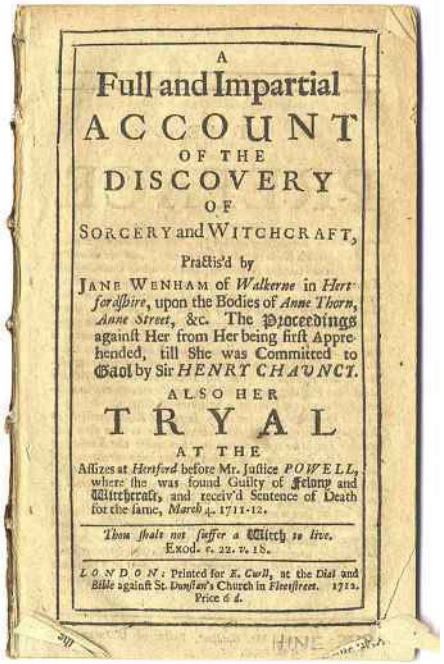
WITCH BOTTLES AND WITCH BLEEDING

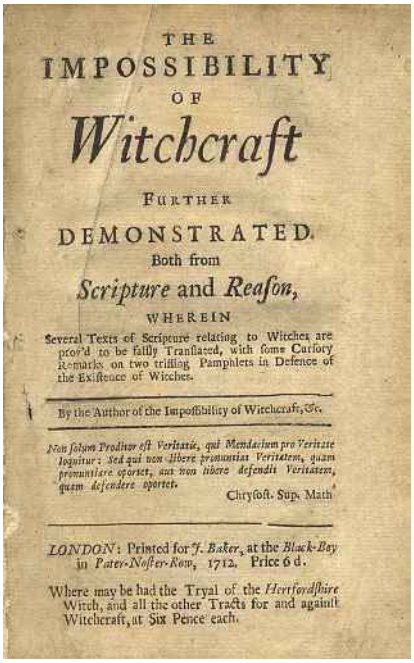
In 1857, a gang of labourers engaged in road works in the Holywood district of Stockport unearthed two witch bottles that had previously been buried under the road.[6] The discovery, reported the newspapers, "caused considerable excitement" in the local area, and not merely from an academic point of view. One local man apparently responded to the discovery by claiming that he had "been bewitched by his mother, and fancies that the bottle might be the spell by which he was bound".[7] On being asked why he believed that he was bewitched, "he replied that his mother had told him so, and he constantly felt in a state of nervous prostration and depression of spirits, together with a sense of failing respiration and approaching death".[8] As the story caught the popular imagination, journalists uncovered more tales of witchcraft circulating among the people of Stockport. One woman told of how her sister had been bewitched, with the focus of the spell being buried on the bed of the river Mersey; she was forced to consult a local wise woman, who through a magical spell and an encounter with spirits was able to lift the enchantment.[9]

The Stockport witch bottle story displays the gulf between the legal position in England, and the beliefs which remained widespread amongst its population. Since the law no longer recognised the reality of witchcraft, those who felt that they were being persecuted by magic had no official recourse to assist them. People who believed they needed protection from witches were forced to take matters into their own hands, most often through witch-bleeding. This practice involved drawing the blood of a supposed witch as a means of dispelling her magical power. Pricking the witch's skin on the arm, or preferably the head, was supposedly sufficient, though the hostile feelings engendered by witches meant that bleedings were often more violent affairs. Regardless of the level of violence present in a witch-bleeding, the supposed witch generally objected and assailants were frequently prosecuted. Subsequent court records and newspaper accounts give us an idea of the scale and nature of the practice.

A typical witch-bleeding case was heard before the Axbridge Petty Sessions in August 1867. Ann Davis was summoned to answer a charge of assault, after having struck her neighbour Elizabeth Williams on the arm with a knife. Davis admitted to the material facts of the charge, though this was, she claimed, merely an act of self-defence. Williams was, stated Davis, a witch who had been "hagging her to death" and whose magical powers had been responsible for the death of her cat and donkey.[10] The magistrates were unimpressed by this argument, with one member of the Bench stating that "the lunatic asylum was the best place for a person entertaining such dangerous notions". Williams had not, however, been seriously injured, and Davis was subsequently sentenced to find a surety to keep the peace for three months.[11]

A similar case was heard in 1869, by magistrates in Durham, after two residents of the village of Pity Me, Jonas Stoker and Mary Howe, had assaulted one of their neighbours, Sarah Judson. Howe claimed that Judson had "used some awful threat" against one of Howe's daughters and that, soon after, her husband and both of her daughters lost their jobs, and the daughter who had been threatened was afflicted with a series of fits. Suspecting witchcraft, Howe enlisted the aid of Stoker, and the two visited the home of Judson, where they stuck a darning needle in her arm. The injury inflicted was minimal, and the magistrate, whilst deploring the belief in witchcraft, discharged Stoker and Howe on the payment of costs.[12]


A
Full and Impartial
ACCOUNT
OF THE
DISCOVERY
OF
SORCERY and WITCHCRAFT,
Practis'd by
JANE WENHAM of *Walkerne* in *Hertfordshire*, upon the Bodies of *Anne Thorn*, *Anne Street*, &c. The Proceedings against Her from Her being first Apprehended, till She was Committed to Gaol by Sir *HENRY CHAUNCY*.
ALSO HER
TRYAL
AT THE
Assizes at *Hertford* before Mr. Justice *POWELL*, where she was found Guilty of Felony and Witchcraft, and receiv'd Sentence of Death for the same, *March* 4. 1711-12.
Thou shalt not suffer a Witch to live.
Exod. c. 22. v. 18.
LONDON: Printed for *E. Curll*, at the Dial and Bible against St. *Dunstan's* Church in *Fleetstreet*. 1712.
Price 6 d.


THE
IMPOSSIBILITY
OF
Witchcraft
FURTHER
DEMONSTRATED.
Both from
Scripture and *Reason*,
WHEREIN
Several Texts of Scripture relating to Witches are prov'd to be falsly Translated, with some Cursory Remarks on two trifling Pamphlets in Defence of the Existence of Witches.
By the Author of the Impossibility of Witchcraft, &c.
Non solum Proditor est Veritatis, qui Mendacium pro Veritate loquitur: Sed qui non libere pronuntiat Veritatem, quam pronuntiare oportet, aut non libere defendit Veritatem, quam defendere oportet.
Chrysost. Sup. Math
LONDON: Printed for *J. Baker*, at the *Black-Boy* in *Pater-Noster-Row*, 1712. Price 6 d.
Where may be had the Tryal of the *Hertfordshire* Witch, and all the other Tracts for and against Witchcraft, at Six Pence each.

HISTORICA GRAPHICA COLLECTION / HERITAGE IMAGES / GETTY IMAGES

TOP: The prosecution of Jane Wenham in 1712 started a pamphlet war about the reality of witchcraft.
ABOVE: Witches in a graveyard and a passing man assailed by demons in a late 18th century print.

KGPA LTD / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

On occasion, the forces of law and order would be called on to intervene in situations before any violence had occurred. In 1865, a woman approached the magistrates in Devon, applying for protection from those who believed that she was a witch. These people had, she said, "frequently threatened her life, alleging that they felt sure that she was the cause of all their misfortunes".[13] The woman, a "jovial looking widow" with a "plump and ruddy countenance", denied that she was a witch and sought protection; as her neighbours believed that "nothing but the spilling of her blood could deprive her of her fiendish power", she feared that she would be the subject of an attack.[14]

When tales like that of the Devonshire widow emerged in the press they were generally treated as curious oddities of rural life rather than examples of the very real threats to women in rural England. As the people of Long Compton found out in 1867, with the death of Ann Tennant, the consequences of a belief in witchcraft could be severe indeed.

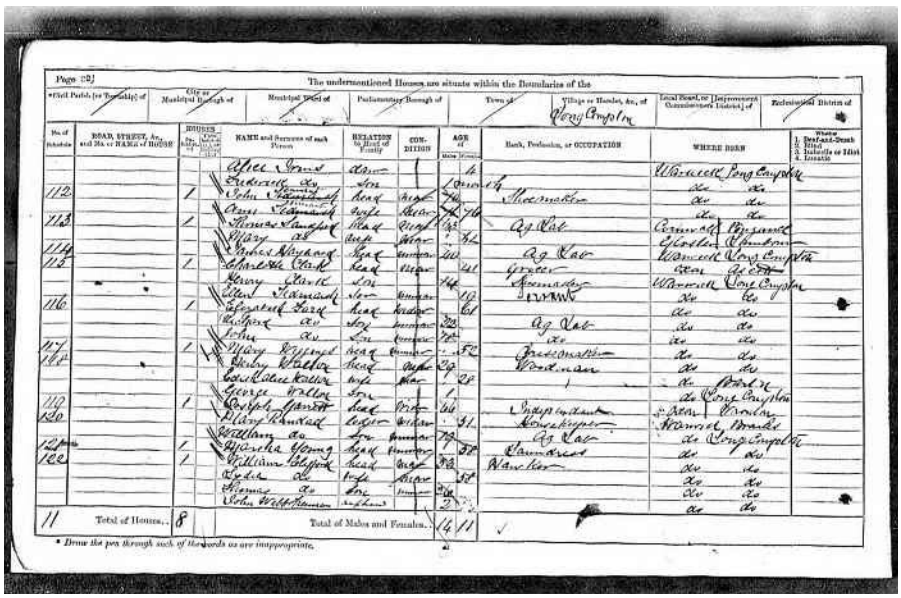
When James Heywood was brought before the assizes, he was entirely unrepentant. Within the village, he claimed, there lived "fifteen or sixteen witches" and that "they had bewitched him, and prevented his doing his work".[15] Witnesses claimed that, after the attack, he had called out to bystanders that: "I have done it; I meant to do it; there are several of them I will serve the same".[16] Yet he was, reported witnesses, "a quiet inoffensive man, except on the subject of witchcraft". The governor of the gaol where Heywood was held before trial had ample opportunity to examine the accused at close quarters, and said that his charge was a little weak-minded and eccentric.[17] Although the jury eventually acquitted Heywood on the grounds of insanity, it is clear that commentators of the time felt there was something disturbing about his air of unthreatening normality.

"Cases of belief in witchcraft show that the superstitions of a people are difficult to exterminate"

FOR WANT OF AN EDUCATION

During Heywood's trial, it was made clear by a number of witnesses that belief in witchcraft remained widespread in Long Compton; a local doctor, called to give evidence, stated that such superstitions were common, and that many local people used the services of a 'wise man' residing near Banbury. The apparent strength of belief in witches in the local area was such that, at the conclusion of the trial, the presiding judge, Baron Bramwell, went as far as to comment that "he hoped something would be done to disabuse the people of a belief in witchcraft".[18] The judge's comments reflected a common theme in 19th-century writing on contemporary witchcraft, namely that it was the product of ignorance and might only be combated through education. As one newspaper editorial from 1858 was to note, whilst "substantial progress" had been made in educating the people of Britain, "the continual recurrence of these cases of belief in witchcraft... shows that the superstitions of a people are most difficult to exterminate, and that even in the midst of a nation distinguished for its intellectual progress there are isolated spots which seem to have stood still while all around them has participated in the general improvement".[19]

Another newspaper editorial of the period declared that education was the "only remedy" to superstition and that, moreover, "it is not mere reading, writing, and arithmetic that are wanted, but a kind of education that will elevate, strengthen and enlarge the thinking powers".[20] If people would only educate themselves, the argument went, then they would abandon their superstitions.



TOP: The Cotswold village of Long Compton in the early 1900s. **ABOVE:** The 1871 census showing that Ann Tennant and her murderer, agricultural labourer James Heywood, were near neighbours.

MEDICINE, MADNESS AND MAGIC IN VICTORIAN TIMES

When James Heywood stood trial for the murder of Ann Tennant, many contemporary observers believed that his obsession with witches was a clear sign of his insanity. This was, however, a conclusion reached on the basis of his obsessional fixation on the malevolent forces he believed inhabited his village, and was not necessarily representative of wider cultural responses to popular superstition. Medical and judicial authorities in the Victorian period were, in fact, more prone to interpret a belief in witches as the consequence of inadequate education than a sign of an unhinged mind. A person could, it was concluded, believe in the existence of witches whilst being otherwise sane.

The question of sanity and a belief in witchcraft was investigated in the courts in 1886, the result of a dispute over the will of a recently deceased Barnstaple man, Thomas Westren. Shortly before his death Westren had been afflicted by eczema and, seeking a cure, had consulted an unnamed "white witch" of Exeter, who had told him that his condition was the result of witchcraft.[1] Westren concluded that he had been bewitched by one of his daughters and, in response, re-wrote his will to exclude his children in favour of his second wife. The will was disputed after Westren's death, partly on the basis that his belief in witchcraft was an indication of his mental incapacity at the time at which the will was made. The courts, nevertheless, found that the will was valid; Westren's belief in witchcraft may have been irrational, judges concluded, but he was otherwise a sane and competent individual.

Whilst a belief in witchcraft was not, in itself, enough to suggest insanity, it was recognised by medical authorities that an obsessive belief in malevolent magic could be a symptom of mental illness. This can be seen in a case of 1873, when a woman named Mary Phillips made an application to the magistrates to "defend her from certain persons unknown, who were always practising witchcraft against her". [2] When examined by the magistrates Phillips stated that: "...she was continually being insulted by young men, who were using bad language close at her side. She could not tell who they were, but they were always following her. She heard them day and night, sometimes the cries were up at the court, and sometimes in close by the wall of her room." [3]

ABOVE: A Victorian illustration showing witches flying to the Sabbath.

HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

Phillips interpreted her experiences as a sign of bewitchment; the magistrates and local authorities, meanwhile, saw them as a sign of mental illness, and it is notable that contemporary records described Phillips as a "pauper lunatic wandering at large".[4] Her experiences were acknowledged by all, with the only substantial question being whether they should be interpreted through a medical or a magical paradigm.

Magical interpretations of mental illness remained relatively common until the end of the 19th century; they were considered by many doctors to be a medical curiosity and, as such, a number of accounts were recorded by practitioners of the time. Typical amongst these is the account taken by a surgeon from an elderly man in the West Riding of Yorkshire in 1891. The man reported that:

Twelve months ago I gave evidence against Mary Anne Tinker at an inquest on her husband. After it was over she told me she would do my business for me; and she said:- 'You will never be the man you are no more.' The first time she attacked me she took me by the back part of the neck and driv' me across the house – I had a house of my own then. I could not see her, but I knew it was her. Some weeks back she wrought me dreadful. I could not keep a limb still or anything in me. I found she had travelled to Rotherham then. She often pinches my hands, but not to hurt. She puts wind into me. She puts it into me by blowing into something she has made. She sends things into the room I sleep in; I can't see 'em, but I can hear 'em. They hop about from ten o'clock to twelve o'clock at night or one in the morning; they go like this, 'flop-flop-flop-flop.' That is when she is blowing into my bowels. I saw your assistance some months ago; and after that she took 'it' off for a time. She is a witch, and a proper witch, but how she do it, the dear lord only knows; I don't. [5]

The unnamed man was clearly in torment, and saw his physical and mental sufferings as the product of bewitchment by a woman he had defied. There was, nevertheless, a clear understanding amongst medical men that such individuals were delusional and, while deserving pity and help, were suffering from a problem which was medical, and not magical, in nature.

The speed at which witchcraft beliefs were subsumed within a medical paradigm was relatively rapid. As late as the mid-19th century, illness – including mental illness – was still dominated by narratives of sin and moral suffering. This was a paradigm in which the Reverend Henry Parr, in a book published in 1861, could declare that of the many mentally ill people confined to Victorian asylums, at least some were undoubtedly possessed by devils. [6] The shift towards describing witchcraft beliefs in terms of mental competence and mental illness was, then, both significant and decisive.

NOTES

1 'A Singular Suit', *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 29 May 1886, p3.

2 'Witchcraft', *Taunton Courier*, 24 Sept 1873, p6.

3 Ibid, p6.

4 Ibid, p6

5 'Witchcraft in Yorkshire', *Portsmouth Evening News*, 8 Jan 1891, p2.

6 Henry Parr, *Sermons Preached in the Parish Church of Tunbridge, Kent* (London: Wertheim, Macintosh, & Hunt, 1861), p199.

The notion that education would dispel ignorance and superstition emerged during a period when England was going through a period of extended, and often contentious, educational reform. Many liberal observers believed that the country trailed behind many of its industrial competitors in educational terms, and that the reluctance of the government to provide free and accessible schooling for the population was a source of shame. The regular emergence of stories of witch-bleedings and other examples of popular superstition could thus be used to support calls for educational reform, as belief in witchcraft was taken as emblematic of the general foolishness of an uneducated population. "It was lamentable," said one writer, "that such ignorance should exist, but it did." [21]

When schooling was underfunded and largely in the hands of private providers, during the 1850s and 1860s, it was relatively easy to claim that superstition was the product of a lack of education. Such arguments were less convincing by the 1890s, after two decades of the concerted efforts of various governments to extend and modernise the school system of England. The strength of belief in witches remained strong in many areas, a point which many middle-class observers found remarkable; "One would have imagined," stated *The Chelmsford Chronicle* in 1890, "in these enlightened times witchcraft would have lost its hold on popular belief". [22] Similarly, reports that some of the inhabitants of Cornwall were going to witches for the cure of their ailments led *The Royal Cornwall Gazette* to lament, in 1893, that: "In spite of all our modern education, the belief in witchcraft in many parts of England is as strong as ever it was". [23] Whilst the notion that the believers in witchcraft were ignorant and ill-educated was a common narrative in press reports during the Victorian era, it became hard to sustain when it was clear that even the well-schooled were resorting to magic.

RURAL LIFE AND EVERYDAY MAGIC

In the early years of the 20th century a writer named Duncan Campbell recorded an account of his life in the Highlands of Scotland during the Victorian era. One of his formative influences, he recalled, was the landscape in which he had grown up and later lived in. Despite the schools, churches, and other institutions which dominated the cultural life of his community he noted that this was a superstitious society, which believed in the reality of ghosts and malevolent spirits. [24] This was, Campbell argued, a product of the Highland environment:

> *Nature with manifold mystic influences keeps her hold on the rural population everywhere, but this hold is particularly strong in mountain lands, lonely isles, and countries which have wide deserts. Nature and God himself can be disregarded by urban masses of people; but it is otherwise in rural districts. Even on the plains of East Anglia and the flats of Holland, people are influenced by forces and sensations which cannot be accounted for by visible and material causes.* [25]

One of the common factors in Victorian witchcraft accounts is that they were predominantly representations of life within a rural world. Almost invariably, tales of supposed witchcraft are situated within a rural landscape; these are stories shaped by livestock and agricultural pursuits, lime kilns and harvests. [26] This was a world which had barely been touched by the urbanisation and industrialisation that dominated English economic and cultural life throughout the 19th century. The village of Long Compton, where Ann Tennant met her death, was located 50 miles (80km) to the south of Birmingham, but only a mile to the north of the Rollright Stones; given his obsession

ABOVE: The Rollright Stones, on the border between modern-day Oxfordshire and Warwickshire, are rich in folklore, including a petrefaction by a hostile witch.

PETER ATKINSON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: The rugged landscape of Edmundbyers, where folk beliefs remained strong in the 19th century.

with witches, it is not hard to imagine that the latter played a far greater role in James Heywood's view of the world than did the former.

Even in the later 19th century, the cultural impact of cities and machines had not yet intruded to any great extent into the capricious and insecure rural world, whose inhabitants were as likely to rely on magic and ritual as science and medicine. This tendency was observed by many of the middle-class outsiders dwelling within rural communities, particularly professional figures such as priests and doctors who, by the nature of their work, were brought into regular contact with a wide range of people. One observer who wrote about the folk beliefs common in rural areas was the Rector of Edmundbyers who, for many years, had dwelt amongst his parishioners in a village in the foothills of the Pennines. The rector noted that folk beliefs and superstitions were common amongst the local people. Injuries and illness, in particular, were met with a magical response; the rector noted that, in his area, there was a woman who would be used for "blowing for burns", whilst a magical stone was employed on a sufferer of erysipelas. [27] Other misfortunes might see similar responses, and the rector stated that in 1865, a "witchman" was consulted to locate a large sum of money stolen from a local works. [28] "These things are strange but true," noted the rector, "and are going on in the midst of us." [29]

The rector's observations provide a further reason as to why education had little traction when it came to displacing beliefs in witchcraft; which was that magic remained useful as a means by which the problems of the world might be understood and resolved. Any hardship, from the pain inflicted by scrofula to the failure of livestock on a Lincolnshire farm to produce enough milk, could be blamed on the activities of witches. [30] People might fear that a disruption in the eggs and milk supplied by their livestock was a sign of malevolent magic or the ill-temper of horses the result of witchcraft. [31] Witchcraft could also function to explain any eerie or otherwise inexplicable event a person might encounter. In one instance in East Dereham, the presence of witchcraft was proved in the mind of the supposed victim when she found a "walking toad" under a clod of earth outside her house. [32]

A belief in witchcraft and magic provided both an explanation of problems, and a means by which they might be resolved. A witch-bleeding might have been no more than a minor ritual, but it had an impact as a concrete, cathartic release of social tensions. A display of educated scepticism might seem a more reasonable and rational response to a modern reader, but offered far less to the inhabitants of rural England in the 19th century.

DR JACOB MIDDLETON is a historian and writer living in Sydney, Australia. He is the author of *Spirits of an Industrial Age*, a history of Victorian prowling ghosts, ghost-impersonators, and Spring-Heeled Jack.

NOTES

1 'Witchcraft', *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 19 Dec 1875, 1.

2 See Brian P Levack, 'The Decline and End of Witchcraft Prosecutions' in Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (eds.) *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), particularly pp7, 10-11.

3 Roy Porter, 'Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment, Romantic and Liberal Thought', in Ankarloo and Clark (eds.) *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, p195.

4 Ibid, p195.

5 It is worth noting that the strong Christian beliefs of the era meant that magic and miraculous events were generally believed to be, if not common, then at least possible. In the words of one early 19th century writer: "I do believe that, for certain purposes, and on certain and all-wise occasions, such things are and have been permitted by the Almighty; but by no means do I believe they are suffered to appear half so frequently as our modern ghost-mongers manufacture them." See Joseph Taylor, *Apparitions; or, the Mystery of Ghosts, Hobgoblins, and Haunted Houses, Developed* (London: Lackington, Allen, and Co, 1815), viii.

6 Generally speaking, the term 'witch bottle' is used to describe an artefact used for the purposes of dispelling a supposed spell; however, the reporting of this event suggests that contemporary observers construed the bottles as components in some form of malefic magic.

7 'Witchcraft in Stockport', *The Wells Journal*, 21 Nov 1857, p3.

8 Ibid, p3.

9 Ibid, p3.

10 'Witchcraft', *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 22 Aug 1867, p2.

11 Ibid, p2.

12 'Witchcraft', *Cheshire Observer*, 9 Jan 1869, p7.

13 'Belief in Witchcraft', *Taunton Courier, and Western Advertiser*, 26 July 1865, p5.

14 Ibid, p5.

15 'Witchcraft', *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 19 Dec 1875, p1.

16 Ibid, p1.

17 Ibid, p1.

18 Ibid, p1.

19 'Sorcery and Witchcraft', *Western Daily Press*, 29 Sep 1858, p2.

20 'Witchcraft Again', *Liverpool Mercury*, 1 Oct 1858, p6.

21 'Belief in Witchcraft', *Western Daily Press*, 18 Sep 1876, p4.

22 'A Strange Story from Sible Hedingham', *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 19 December 1890, 8.

23 'Witchcraft', *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 23 Nov 1893, p6.

24 Duncan Campbell, *Reminiscences and Reflections of an Octogenarian Highlander* (Inverness: Northern Counties Newspaper and Printing and Publishing Company, Limited, 1910), p3.

25 Campbell, p3.

26 'Witchcraft', *Taunton Courier*, 29 Nov 1865, p8; 'Belief in Witchcraft', *Grantham Journal*, 27 Dec 1890, p7.

27 'Witchcraft in Durham', *Hartlepool Mail*, 16 November 1882, 3.

28 Ibid, p3.

29 Ibid, p3.

30 'Witchcraft at home', *Portsmouth Evening News*, 19 June 1883, p2; 'Witchcraft in Lincolnshire', *Grantham Journal*, 15 June 1895, p2.

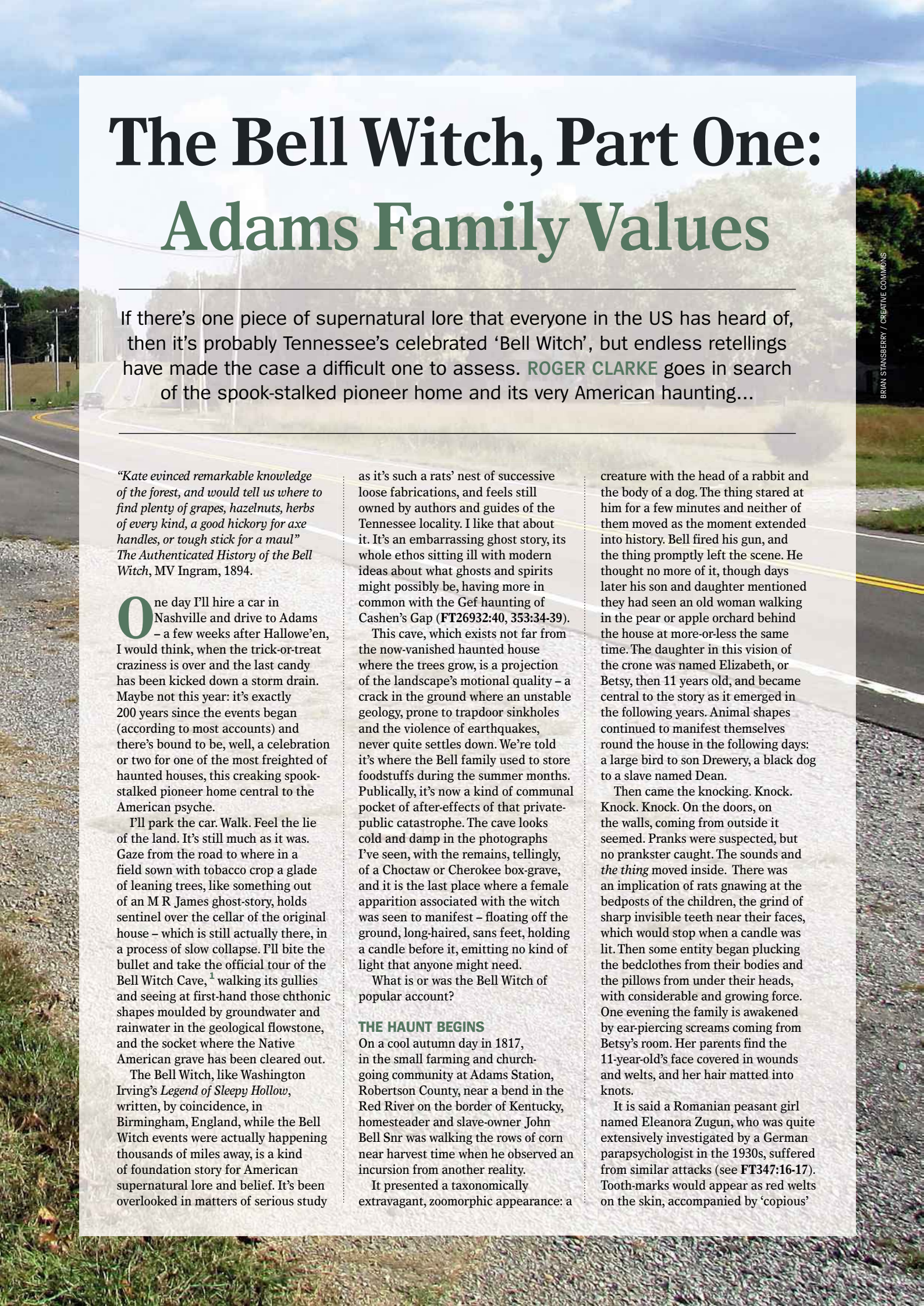
31 'Belief in Witchcraft', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 7 Mar 1890, p4; '"Witchcraft" in Lincolnshire', *Gloucester Citizen*, 15 June 1895, p3.

32 'Modern Witchcraft', *Morpeth Herald*, 19 April 1879, p6.

TENNESSEE
CIVIL WAR
TRAILS
3C 38
BELL WITCH
To the north was the farm of John Bell, an early, prominent settler from North Carolina. According to legend, his family was harried during the early 19th century by the famous Bell Witch. She kept the household in turmoil, assaulted Bell, and drove off Betsy Bell's suitor. Even Andrew Jackson who came to investigate, retreated to Nashville after his coach wheels stopped mysteriously. Many visitors to the house saw the furniture crash about them and heard her shriek, sing, and curse.
TENNESSEE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

The Bell Witch, Part One:
Adams Family Values

If there's one piece of supernatural lore that everyone in the US has heard of, then it's probably Tennessee's celebrated 'Bell Witch', but endless retellings have made the case a difficult one to assess. ROGER CLARKE goes in search of the spook-stalked pioneer home and its very American haunting...



BRIAN STANSBERRY / CREATIVE COMMONS

"Kate evinced remarkable knowledge of the forest, and would tell us where to find plenty of grapes, hazelnuts, herbs of every kind, a good hickory for axe handles, or tough stick for a maul"
The Authenticated History of the Bell Witch, MV Ingram, 1894.

One day I'll hire a car in Nashville and drive to Adams – a few weeks after Hallowe'en, I would think, when the trick-or-treat craziness is over and the last candy has been kicked down a storm drain. Maybe not this year: it's exactly 200 years since the events began (according to most accounts) and there's bound to be, well, a celebration or two for one of the most freighted of haunted houses, this creaking spook-stalked pioneer home central to the American psyche.

I'll park the car. Walk. Feel the lie of the land. It's still much as it was. Gaze from the road to where in a field sown with tobacco crop a glade of leaning trees, like something out of an M R James ghost-story, holds sentinel over the cellar of the original house – which is still actually there, in a process of slow collapse. I'll bite the bullet and take the official tour of the Bell Witch Cave, [1] walking its gullies and seeing at first-hand those chthonic shapes moulded by groundwater and rainwater in the geological flowstone, and the socket where the Native American grave has been cleared out.

The Bell Witch, like Washington Irving's *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, written, by coincidence, in Birmingham, England, while the Bell Witch events were actually happening thousands of miles away, is a kind of foundation story for American supernatural lore and belief. It's been overlooked in matters of serious study as it's such a rats' nest of successive loose fabrications, and feels still owned by authors and guides of the Tennessee locality. I like that about it. It's an embarrassing ghost story, its whole ethos sitting ill with modern ideas about what ghosts and spirits might possibly be, having more in common with the Gef haunting of Cashen's Gap (**FT26932:40**, **353:34-39**).

This cave, which exists not far from the now-vanished haunted house where the trees grow, is a projection of the landscape's motional quality – a crack in the ground where an unstable geology, prone to trapdoor sinkholes and the violence of earthquakes, never quite settles down. We're told it's where the Bell family used to store foodstuffs during the summer months. Publically, it's now a kind of communal pocket of after-effects of that private-public catastrophe. The cave looks cold and damp in the photographs I've seen, with the remains, tellingly, of a Choctaw or Cherokee box-grave, and it is the last place where a female apparition associated with the witch was seen to manifest – floating off the ground, long-haired, sans feet, holding a candle before it, emitting no kind of light that anyone might need.

What is or was the Bell Witch of popular account?

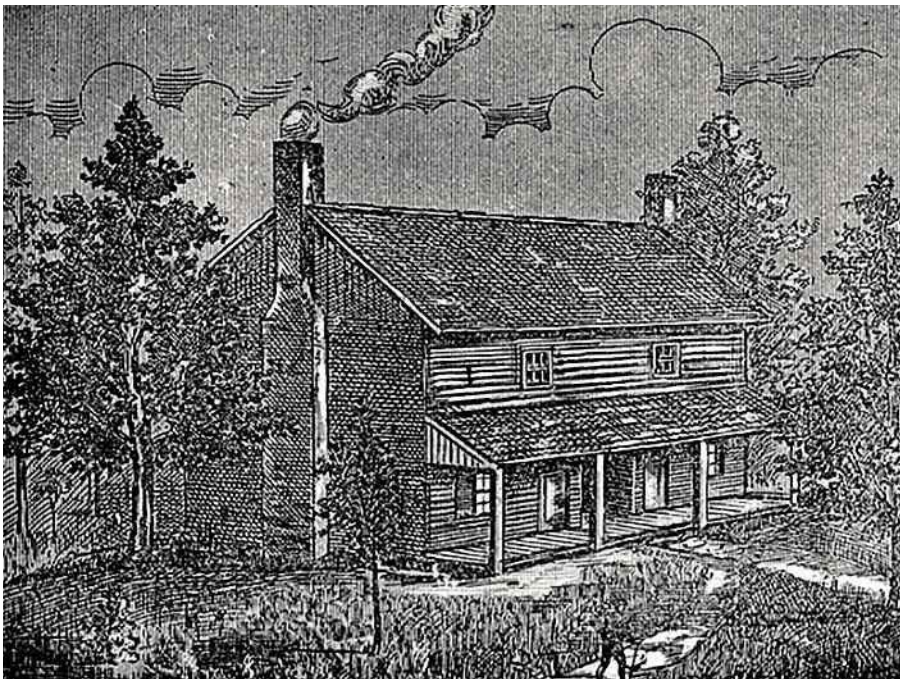
THE HAUNT BEGINS

On a cool autumn day in 1817, in the small farming and church-going community at Adams Station, Robertson County, near a bend in the Red River on the border of Kentucky, homesteader and slave-owner John Bell Snr was walking the rows of corn near harvest time when he observed an incursion from another reality.

It presented a taxonomically extravagant, zoomorphic appearance: a creature with the head of a rabbit and the body of a dog. The thing stared at him for a few minutes and neither of them moved as the moment extended into history. Bell fired his gun, and the thing promptly left the scene. He thought no more of it, though days later his son and daughter mentioned they had seen an old woman walking in the pear or apple orchard behind the house at more-or-less the same time. The daughter in this vision of the crone was named Elizabeth, or Betsy, then 11 years old, and became central to the story as it emerged in the following years. Animal shapes continued to manifest themselves round the house in the following days: a large bird to son Drewery, a black dog to a slave named Dean.

Then came the knocking. Knock. Knock. Knock. On the doors, on the walls, coming from outside it seemed. Pranks were suspected, but no prankster caught. The sounds and *the thing* moved inside. There was an implication of rats gnawing at the bedposts of the children, the grind of sharp invisible teeth near their faces, which would stop when a candle was lit. Then some entity began plucking the bedclothes from their bodies and the pillows from under their heads, with considerable and growing force. One evening the family is awakened by ear-piercing screams coming from Betsy's room. Her parents find the 11-year-old's face covered in wounds and welts, and her hair matted into knots.

It is said a Romanian peasant girl named Eleanora Zugun, who was quite extensively investigated by a German parapsychologist in the 1930s, suffered from similar attacks (see **FT347:16-17**). Tooth-marks would appear as red welts on the skin, accompanied by 'copious'



amounts of unidentified spittle, which when analysed "swarmed with staphylococci" according to Alan Gauld and AD Cornell in their book *Poltergeists* (1979). Betsy's arms were scarred from the attentions of the ghost, pinching, bruising, cutting; harm from the spirit or harm from the self, take your pick.

Then came the whispers, gaining power and expressive traction, burgeoning into the main feature of the haunt. Initially it sounded like an old woman crying weakly and somewhat piteously, but it was the spirit, it seems now, learning how to speak, as if speaking was an unfamiliar and alien process. Again, this recalls the perceived learning process of Gef a century later. Inexplicable lights danced round the outside of the house in the evening.

Betsy hallucinates that her bed is on fire and at this point the spirit begins to speak words and sentences of mocking malignancy, with implicit threats against John Bell; it is said these vocalisations have an odd, vexing sonic quality, and bring ringing, or even a flow of blood, to people's ears.

John Bell Sr begins to suffer a series of maladies; he says he can feel something like a stick lodged sideways in his mouth. He finds it hard to speak and eat. The Bells share their experiences with members of the local church, and there begins a series of visits and witnessing by their usually respectable neighbours. The children are continually brutalised in bed with stinging slaps from invisible hands. One neighbour challenges the ghost to shake his hand – it does – it's a "soft, delicate" impress that clutches his hand sideways, as if reaching up, or reaching down; a peculiar detail. The fame of the spirit brings many visitors, including the pleasingly named Dr William Fort from Missouri, who believes the whole business is an act of ventriloquism. Witch-hunters and ghost-removers are sent packing by the ghost.

The spirit seems to have wide-ranging knowledge of events all over the locality, and the secrets of many households. Similar supernatural indiscretions are not as rare as one might suppose – they were noted by the Welsh writer Giraldus Cambriensis as far back as 1191: "it taxed them with all the things they had done in their lives which they were least willing should be known or spoken about".

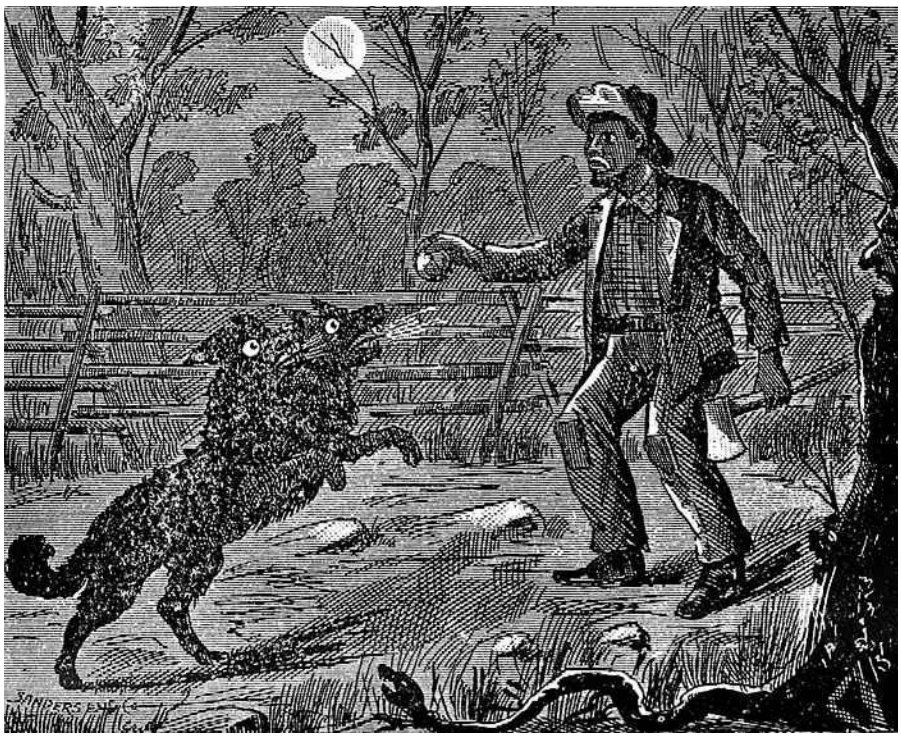
Then a very odd thing happens, not much dwelt upon in most accounts, but very interesting to me. John Bell finds himself excommunicated from the Red River Baptist Church two weeks into the haunt, on 15 November 1817, superficially on charges of usury, though perhaps the nature of the demonic entity residing in his household has something to do with this rejection. It must have been a terrible blow in such a God-fearing small community.

A LANDSCAPE OF GHOSTS

Spring in Tennessee. *Cornus florida* puts on a beautiful white floral display in early spring. One day in 1818, 12-year-old Betsy went into the woods looking for the shrub. Easter Sunday was approaching and she was gathering flowers to beautify the house. Something else is going on, though. She sees something wrong, quite wrong. She believes she sees the figure of a woman hanging with both arms from a red oak[2] at a nearby sinkhole; there are some 3,602 of them in this district.[3] The figure has an ape-like agility. As Betsy reaches to break off a branch of flowering dogwood, a disembodied voice says: "Betsy Bell, don't break a flower; if you do, you will pay well for it".[4]

Events rumble on and in January 1819 Betsy turns 13; the witch brings fruit from the West Indies. Despite his removal from the church, its leader, by beautiful coincidence another Fort, Dr Suggs Fort, proclaims his support for John Bell. Bell is attacked by the witch during a meal with a neighbour, and the witch for the first time vocalises its desire to kill him, as invisible whips whirr through the air and force him howling in pain to the floor.

Like some antebellum Baba Yaga, the Bell Witch moves between acts of kindness and malice. It also expresses different voices and personalities. The spirit claims to be looking for a lost tooth beneath the Bell House, and



TOP: The Bell House. **ABOVE:** The slave Dean encounters a two-headed black dog.

claims to be from one of the nearby Native American graves. After a brief respite, it sends the household on a fool's errand to retrieve supposedly buried treasure near Red River beneath an enormous flat rock.

It appears as a rabbit in the woods, a black dog on a road. It turns the slave Dean into a mule, a detail from the life of St Augustine[5] to those who know. A whole nest of entities makes itself known: the 'witch family'. 'Blackdog' has a female voice and is head of the family. 'Mathematics' and 'Cypocryphy' speak in the manner of young girls. 'Jerusalem' is a boy. Betsy begins a shy courtship with an older boy named Joshua; both her teacher Richard Powell, who has designs on marrying the girl himself, and the witch, in most accounts, are disapproving.

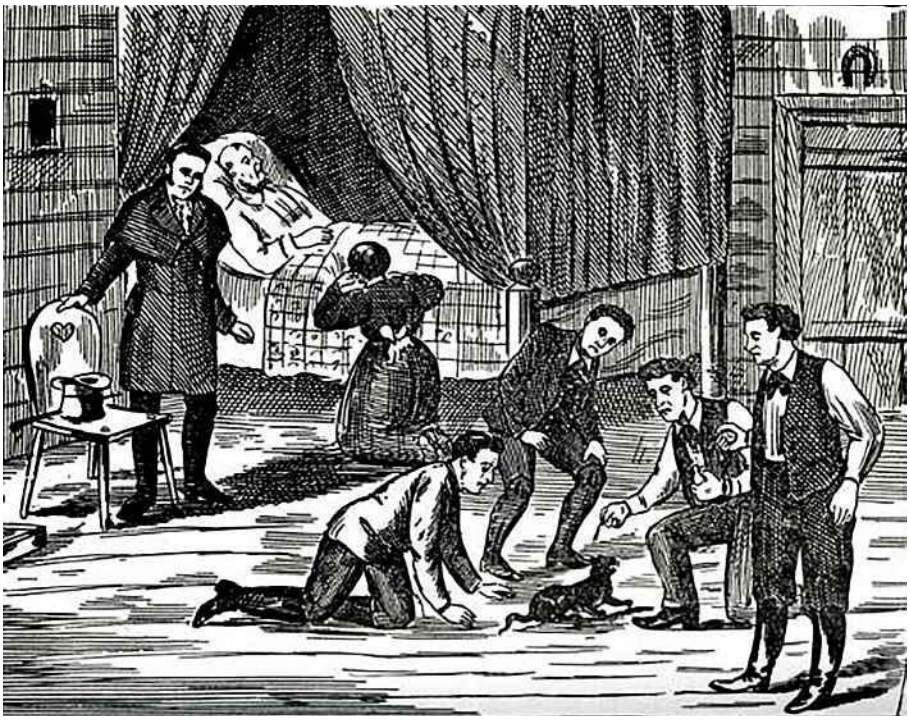
The witch suddenly identifies herself to Revd James Gunn as 'Kate Batts'. She is a former neighbour of the Bells, another slave-owner, one suspected of practising witchcraft. Kate Batts was, by blood, Mrs Bell's niece.

The witch's loathing of the father of the house is matched by her kittenish adoration for Mrs Bell; in other words, her aunt Lucy. When Lucy falls ill of pleurisy, the witch sings to her and magics hazelnuts from the woods, which fall from the ceiling. When asked to crack them, she cracks them. With this power, she could break every bone in John Bell's body, but she seems unable to do so. A seemingly universal prohibition, commented on by both Guy Playfair and Colin Wilson, seems to forbid serious harm to victims of poltergeists.

The Bell Witch is energetically, vividly racist – scurrilously, offensively so. She violently upbraids and assaults the slaves but seems frightened of visiting their houses. She locks the legs of a young black girl, Phyllis, behind her head. "*I despise how you slaves smell*," Kate's disembodied voice rants to the room. Another domestic slave, 'Anky', is covered in a layer of the witch's spittle when she hides beneath a bed. "*There's a bad smell in this house and it's 'Ank' – I smell her under Old Luce's bed*". When one slave carries what is clearly an African charm[6] to protect himself from the spirit, Kate demands he surrender it, which she then combusts.

According to the main living commentator on the case, "the land that comprised the Bell farm is the final resting-place of hundreds and possibly thousands of Native Americans".[7] The slave 'Uncle Zeke' sees a landscape lively with Indian ghosts who are in a kind of locked purgatorial state within the bounds of landscape. "*Those dead Native Americans, who lived here, are still here, because they don't have anywhere to go*", says Zeke, echoing an idea, popular at the time, that the unbaptised became disembodied souls, because Heaven and Hell are closed to them. When Zeke hears about neighbour Cobban Hall digging up Indian bones, he knows there is "*gwinter be trouble*".

There's a visit, supposedly, from the then Major General, later President, Andrew Jackson, arch-Mason and scourge of the Native American populace in the area. He is 'quoted' as saying "I would rather fight the entire British Army than deal with that thing they call the Bell Witch!" [8]



ABOVE: The death of John Bell and the administering of the mysterious liquid to the cat.
LEFT: Betsy Bell, in an illustration from the 1894 *Authenticated History of the Bell Witch*.

A whole nest of entities makes itself known – the 'witch family'

All Hallows. The crisis peaks. In October 1819 John Bell's shoes repeatedly fly off when he's outside tending the hog pen. He has a seizure of some kind. Two months later, a few hours before the winter solstice, he dies. John Jr supposedly finds an anomalous bottle of medicine in the room, one third full of an unknown liquid. Kate claims she has used it to poison Bell. Some is given to the cat; it deranges, then kills it. The vial is thrown into the bedroom fireplace, and a popping is heard as it bursts into a bright blue flame [9] that soon flares out. Surely now she can prove her credentials as a spirit of the dead, yet when requested, Kate refuses or seems unable to put the family in direct post-mortem contact with John Bell Snr. She sings in the open air beside the grave, performing riotous drinking songs during the funeral; her contempt is complete and her summons seems to be complete.

In May 1821, Kate bids the family farewell and claims she will revisit in seven years. Betsy marries her teacher. Time passes. January of 1828 comes and it goes. Then in February comes a scratching on the weatherboarding outside the house, and once again, covers on the bed are twitched away from sleepers. In a curious incident, smoke congeals into a large ball of dark wool the size of a 'water pail' which then rolls up the chimney. After a while, she quits the home and visits that of son John Bell Jr, who speaks angrily to the witch. Amongst other things, she predicts the Civil War. After several months of prophetic discussions, she leaves. Or does she? There are ambiguous incidents in a house made from the salvaged wood from the Bell manse on Brown's Ford Bluff. In the 1950s teenagers who steal a gravestone connected to the case come to a sticky end when the car crashes and they are killed.

EARLY ACCOUNTS

It's maintained in most of the books on the subject that the first ever official mention of the Bell Witch in print was in Goodspeed's *History of Tennessee* (1886). The chapter on Robertson County observed:

A remarkable occurrence, which attracted wide-spread interest, was connected with the family of John Bell, who settled near what is now Adams Station about 1804. So great was the excitement that people came from hundreds of miles around to witness the manifestations of what was popularly known as the "Bell Witch." This witch was supposed to be some spiritual being having the voice and attributes of a woman. It was invisible to the eye, yet it would hold conversation and even shake hands with certain individuals. The freaks if performed were wonderful and seemingly designed to annoy the family. It would take the sugar from the bowls, spill the milk, take the quilts from the beds, slap and pinch the children, and then laugh at the discomfiture of its victims. At first it was supposed to be a good spirit, but its subsequent acts, together with the curses with which it supplemented its remarks, proved the contrary.

At its most stripped down in the 1886 account, which does not include the death of John Bell at the hand of the witch, we can suppose a possibly genuine poltergeist manifestation which has many things in common with other such haunts. There is an invisible intelligence in the household of pubescent children who likes to taunt and annoy. It is a lying spirit, and it tells untruths. It is a trickster. There are physical welts and weals on the skin of the focus child. Bedclothes are twitched from beds. Foodstuffs, in particular, are apported, and interfered with. Though the most famous aspect of the haunt – the vocalisations – *are* rare, they are certainly not unknown. The handshake seems to be an early detail, and that is indeed quite an odd and unique marker.

However, it turns out there are two earlier sources, the first in a newspaper called the *Green Mountain Freeman*, published in a small piece on 7 February 1856. [10]

Interestingly, the author relates the story to the Cock Lane ghost (see **FT150:30-33, 335:36-41**). It's similar insofar as it seems to have audiences of strangers attending after dark in an apparently active haunt. It's a sceptical account, noting that the witch only manifested itself, "as ghosts are wont to do, at night". People came from all over to hear it talk, till Mr Bell complained that the guests were eating him out of house and home. "It would be heard sometimes in one part of the house, and sometimes in another; moving about from the floor, under the floor, and the walls, to the beds, open space in the midst of the house, the roof etc… when asked how long it was going to remain, it would replay 'Until Joshua Gardner and Betsy Bell get married". The report ends on an unequivocal and damning note: "*It turned out that Miss Betsey (sic) Bell was a ventriloquist*".

There's also a handwritten deposition in the State Library and Archives in Nashville, which originates from the Archives of the Tennessee Historical Society. I'm most grateful for a Twitter friend, Douglass Harlow from the US, for bringing this to my attention, and sending me copies of the original handwritten documentation. They date from 1880 and are two county 'sketches' that were written for the Nashville

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ABOVE: Another roadside attraction – a sign for the Bell Witch Cave in Adams, Tennessee. **TOP:** The grave of John and Lucy Bell.

WWW78 / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: The entrance to the Bell Witch Cave.

Centennial Exposition, a kind of city fair or fete, in 1880. They were later reproduced in the journal *American Historical Magazine*.[11] The sketch of Sevier County is by WL Duggan, while the Robertson County sketch is anonymous.

I'm going to look at this in some detail as it isn't that well known in the literature.

The account claims that the haunting began in 1818 and carried on to 1822, with the death of Mr Bell. It began with scratchings and bedclothes twitching. People came from six counties to hear its 'profane' and 'vulgar' talk. It claimed early on to be a spirit, complaining that its burial had been disturbed, and it seems it wasn't just a tooth but a whole skull dug from a mound by the river and taken back to the family home. It seems the family replaced the skull in the grave from which it was taken, but the hauntings continued.

Its early manifestations include gouging out daubing from between the wooden logs of the house and sprinkling it on the "middle of the floor". It told them where to look for gold on a fool's errand. It gripped Betsy so hard that bruises in the shape of fingers could be seen on her arm. It could speak several languages – which ones, is not said. It shook a man's hand. Its range of knowledge of the community appeared to extend about seven miles. It could unlock doors, despite the effort of a "stout" man trying to stop the key from turning. Clearly mimicking the voice of a household member, it would set the dogs on passers-by as they walked the road. It would take chewing tobacco out of the mouth of Mr Bell and deposit it in an "old, much-used pipe stem" – "at least he thought it was there, though his friend could see nothing of the kind". Hot coffee would disappear from a ready cup, as if someone had drunk it.

There are a couple of details I find quite chilling. It cracked hazel nuts for Mrs Bell, as well as giving her grapes, dropping the "*wet hulls upon the floor, looking as if they had been moistened by being cracked in the mouth*". Its arrival followed a graded noise-pattern, a ladder of deposition from top to bottom. "*On making its approach it would first be heard striking the roof of the house with a brush or limb of a tree; then it would be heard to drop as if from the [rafters?] to the second floor, and then on the first, making as loud a noise as would any large man".*

One thing is made very clear: there were never any apparitions – "All the time the witch was invisible".

"*At times, when family and friends would be sitting round the fire, nuts and acorns would fall on the hearth, coming apparently from the flue of the chimney, but when anyone would endeavour to pick them up, they couldn't be found. On one occasion a large dinner pot rolled down and out into the floor, and then disappeared leaving not a greasy spot. At one time a vial of poison was found in the flue of the chimney and being taken down, Dr George B Hopson gave one drop to a cat, causing its death in several seconds. The witch claimed to have put the poison there for the purpose of killing Mr Bell. Being asked how it was going to administer the poison, it said by pouring it into the dinner pot. It is remarkable that although he enjoyed good health up to the time of this event, Mr Bell died within days after the vial was found, being in a stupor at the time of his death*".

In the second anonymous document, the witch's farmyard talents are recorded. "*It could bark and lap like a dog, buzz like a swarm of bees, crow like a rooster, gobble and yelp like a turkey, quack like a duck…"*

There appear to have been people writing about the case between 1891 and 1894 (including individuals identified as Charles W Tyler, Mahala Darden and Rev James G Byrns),[12] but it was only in 1894 that the first really extensive account of the Bell Witch was published…

ROGER CLARKE is is a former writer and film critic at the *Independent*. His book *A Natural History of Ghosts* is widely available from Penguin.

NOTES

1 http://www.bellwitchcave.com/

2 In another episode, the whole devil family of the Bell Witch are described as sitting in trees; *it's in the trees* etc.

3 https://tnlandforms.us/landforms/sinks.php

4 In my childhood we were never allowed to bring May or flowering Hawthorn into the house – my mother would take it straight out if you did.

5 He claimed that there were certain taverns in Italy who served cheese to their customers which would turn them into a beast of burden for an allotted time, during which these unscrupulous men would use their guests as beasts of burden.

6 It included 'Tarn Fire' and 'Spunk' (I have no idea) and 'Brimstone' and 'Foxfire', also sometimes called "fairy fire", a bioluminescent fungus present in decaying wood, and was held together by strands of his wife's own hair.

7 Pat Fitzhugh, *The Bell Witch: The Full Account* (The Armand Press, Nashville, 2009.)

8 There is no independent evidence of his attendance at the farm, or that he even knew about the Bell Witch.

9 At the time that this fabrication was inserted by MV Ingram in 1894 in his *Authenticated History of the Famous Bell Witch*, it was a well-established theatrical tradition that a blue light on stage denoted the presence of the supernatural.

10 http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84023209/1856-02-07/ed-1/seq-1/

11 WL Duggan, "Sketches of Sevier and Robertson Counties", *American Historical Magazine*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1900, pp310–325 (www.jstor.org/stable/42657394).

12 The Tennessee archival document also mentions FR Miles, William Pride, W Gooch, Ben B Batts.

THE HIEROPHANT'S APPRENTICE PRESENTS

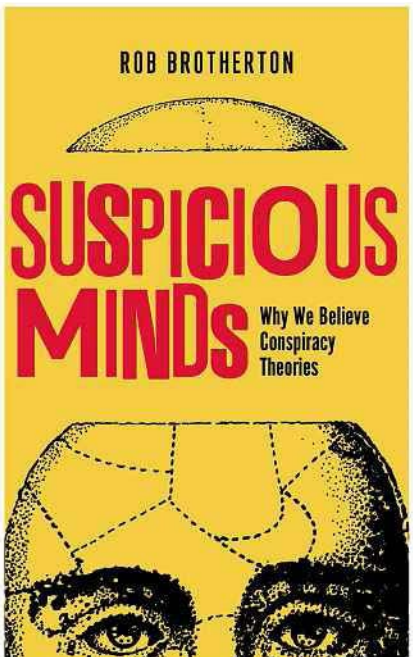
BUILDING A FORTEAN LIBRARY

26. DOWN YOUR RABBIT HOLE

Consider this: "According to polls conducted over the last decade or so, around half of Americans think their government is probably hiding the truth about the 9/11 attacks. Almost four in 10 suspect that climate change is a scientific fraud. Something like a third believe the government is likely hiding evidence of aliens. More than a quarter are worried about the New World Order. In a 2013 survey, four per cent of the people polled (which, extended to the entire population of the United States, would mean 12 *million* people) said they think 'shape-shifting reptilian people control our world by taking on human form and gaining political power to manipulate our societies.' It's not just Americans... According to a 2011 Pew Research Center survey, between half and three quarters of people in various Middle Eastern countries doubt that Arab hijackers pulled off the 9/11 attacks… Four out of 10 Russians think that America faked the moon landings… And in Brazil, a popular conspiracy theory asserts that the American military is planning to invade the Amazon rain forest and take control of its rich natural resources." Conspiracy theories, then, are neither the exclusive property of heavily-armed, beetle-browed trailer trash nor limited to that great nation where such admirable folk abide in peace. Conspiracism is nonetheless a minority interest – or obsession. The rest of us nurse our simple faith in (among other things) accidents, coincidences and the cock-up theory of history, and wonder why *so many* people believe that everything that happens is the result of a fiendishly complex plot, and one that 'only' they know about. It's this question that Rob Brotherton explores in *Suspicious Minds*.

The central chapters of Brotherton's argument could have been written in almost any order, since the factors that bring about conspiracy thinking don't form a logical, linear flow, one thing following from another: rather, they form a network of influences, predispositions and propensities, most of them based in straightforward survival instincts. Taken together, and suitably fuelled, they may act as a set of centripetal forces to tip the susceptible mind into what most of us might call paranoid thinking. One of Brotherton's most salient points is that this isn't paranoia as such – just a natural caution, which we all share, taken to extraordinary lengths.

Consequently, he doesn't spend too much time on detailing or disentangling individual conspiracy theories, although along the way we are treated to some curious facts. Take the tin-foil hat, famous for fending off EM radiations emitted by aliens and other unseemly entities that want to control and confuse one's thoughts. The idea, it turns out, was first dreamed up by Julian Huxley for a science fiction story, *The Tissue-Culture King*, published in 1927. In 2005 researchers at MIT put tinfoil hats to the test (one would so love to see that grant application),



checking sundry designs including the Fez, Classical and Centurion. "Contrary to expectations… not only did foil fail to block radio waves, it actually *amplified* certain frequencies – notably [those] allocated to the US government for GPS communications." So now we know where we stand on that one. (To the full-on conspiracist, such findings are, of course, just another part of the all-pervading cover-up.) Consider also the insistence of early 19th-century opponents of smallpox vaccination that the vaccine contained "poison of adders, the blood, entrails and excretion of bats, toads and suckling whelps", and compare with latter-day obsessives' claims that modern vaccines contain antifreeze, insect repellent and spermicide. Perhaps oddest of all: it seems that the infinite wickednesses of the Elders of Zion include the promotion of jazz, chewing gum (makes women promiscuous, honest) – "and even, for some reason, dog exhibitions." Barking mad, or what?

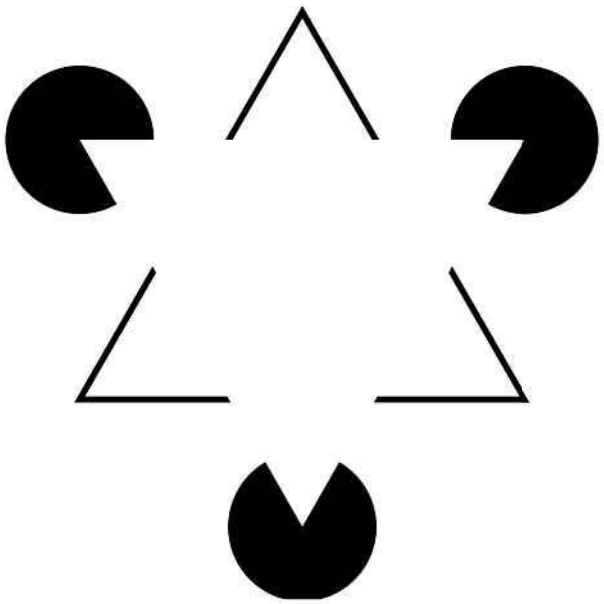
But, as Brotherton continually and tactfully reminds us, we shouldn't be too snooty about conspiracism. Differently sane as some of its more exotic nooks and crannies may be, conspiratorial logic has its roots in what keeps the rest of us functioning normally, not to say alive. Among its many other functions, the human brain seeks patterns. We are driven to try to make sense of the world, especially those parts of it that don't, at first blush, make sense. We join dots, even where they exist only by inference, as in the trick illustration on the opposite page (invented by the Italian psychologist Gaetano Kanizsa in 1955) – look at it and see if you can 'unsee' the non-existent lines of the white triangle. Detecting patterns allows us to understand the activity of a flock of sheep (goats take more effort), plant and harvest crops, choose a suitable or reject an unsuitable mate, and (up to a point) predict the weather: all remain critical to survival. As is reading the behaviour of traffic on a crowded highway. It's the task of conspiracists to detect the patterns the rest of us don't see.

The virtually unavoidable next crackling of the neurons produces the suspicion, even conviction, that a discovered pattern must be significant – it must have a *meaning*. Kanisza's triangle(s) demonstrate something about perception, but also form a *Magen David*, the Shield of David. Now there's a feast for the

imagination. Which needs little stimulation to start generating stories – *narratives* if you will – to elaborate and explain and put flesh on the pattern and its significance. A further more or less autonomic process that comes into play is our propensity to discern *intention* in behaviour and events. The sparser our information, the more ambiguous things are, and the greater the tendency to let the imagination run erroneously riot. On the other hand, if you spot (sorry) a leopard supine on the branches above you, you're at once, sensibly, wondering if it's asleep, if it has its eye on you or that dik-dik over there for its next snack, or if it's just being feline and enjoying the sound of its own purr. And without an intention detector, Brotherton shows through sundry illustrations, most of human (let alone animal) life and culture would not be possible.

The 9/11 conspiracy theory illustrates this perfectly. It stands on two major legs: that the Twin Towers and World Trade Center collapsed as they did because of pre-positioned demolition charges, which caused them to fall straight down rather than topple sideways; and the aircraft that were flown into the buildings were, in effect, piloted by patsies to distract from the Truth and provide cover for a preconceived US government retaliation against, e.g., Saddam Hussein, who hadn't been done in properly a decade previously. So, it's all a fiendish government plot. The conventional truth is that skyscrapers are *designed* (for obvious reasons) to sit straight down on themselves in the unlikely event of their collapsing – leaving aside the difficulty of placing such charges undetected – and that a handful of Arab fanatics *did* pull off this spectacular assault. But that, Brotherton observes, is deemed too simple an explanation for an event so massive in its consequences: the more devastating the incident, the more elaborate must be the conspiratorial narrative behind it, is the general rule he identifies from this and other examples. And compared to the parsimonious official version, the complexity of the 9/11 conspiracy story and its cast of thousands "offers a virtually limitless supply of intent".

What *kind* of story are we talking about in conspiracy lore? Brotherton has two answers: first, the conspiracist, in seeing through the camouflage and shenanigans of the 'official' version (of pretty much everything) and revealing the unsuspected scary Truth, is re-enacting an ancient, archetypal plot: the Hero defeats the Monster, or good underdog vanquishes wicked top dog. Compare everything from *Beowulf* or St George and the dragon to *The Lord of the Rings* (or *High Noon* and *The Man from Laramie* if you prefer). And the truth shall set you free. Therein lies some, albeit not the whole, of the appeal of conspiracy theories. But there is also something peculiar to conspiracy tales: although every counter-argument to them is absorbed as 'part of the cover-up', the conspiracies themselves remain unproven. Brotherton contends that this is by design. He points out (as did Dr Clare Birchall two decades ago – apparently unnoticed by Brotherton) that conspiracy narratives have no final resolution, and he reasons that the implication that there is always more to be discovered keeps the very notion of conspiracy alive. These theories "deep down, are *unanswered questions*" and "always a work in progress," he says. Which perhaps explains the zealous addiction they produce in devotees.



"AFTER NOURISHMENT, SHELTER AND COMPANIONSHIP, STORIES ARE THE THING WE NEED MOST IN THE WORLD."

Philip Pullman

To gloss: this is a world in which there are no accidents, no 'mere' coincidences, no credibility to the bumper sticker that fatalistically proclaims SHIT HAPPENS. We shouldn't resign ourselves to fate, but to the endless machinations of the Powers That Be. As Brotherton indicates (see below), this is magical thinking. Everything is connected. Nothing is insignificant: all dots will join in the end, from traffic lights to treacle pie. Occam's Razor does not apply. There are no exits from this particular burning theatre. Paradoxically this doesn't seem to bother conspiracists, all bawling "*Fire*!" as they are, since (we infer) such occult knowledge is power and confers agency to the powerless. So even in ultimate defeat the conspiracist remains a hero, albeit a martyred one. At the same time, there must be comfort in the thought that as long as there is delving to be done in pursuit of the ultimate secret, the prospect of nemesis remains distant. And meanwhile, too, one can enjoy a world free from uncertainty.

Brotherton has one more common human characteristic to offer in his general thesis that conspiracists belong at one end of a spectrum of normalities, and that is confirmation bias. At its simplest, this means that we tend to look for evidence that supports our preconceptions: hence some of us read the *Salisbury Review* for its incomparable wisdom while others prefer the incontrovertible perspicacity of the *Morning Star*. So, research shows, people who start with a penchant for the unorthodox will tend to give a sympathetic hearing to conspiracy theories. But it goes deeper than that: people giving credence to a wide range of paranormal and anomalistic claims will tend to believe conspiracy theories. The scientific method's emphasis on falsifiability evolved to overcome this habit of mind (not that it always succeeds), and forteans ideally make impartial judgements about evidence of oddities. But most of us go with our own flow. "When we're faced with a murky pool of evidence," says Brotherton, "biased assimilation filters out anything that doesn't fit what we already believe, leaving behind the illusion that the truth is crystal clear". As ever, Brotherton adduces loads of research to secure his analysis.

Given the evidence, it's easy enough to agree that conspiracism is rooted in innate human responses to the world. If one has a quibble with Brotherton it's that he doesn't explore what it may be that tends or bends one person to crediting conspiracies, while another remains content to accept that the world is largely as it seems. That may seem a lot to ask, but someone ought to try. If the Illuminati will allow it…

Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories*, Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015

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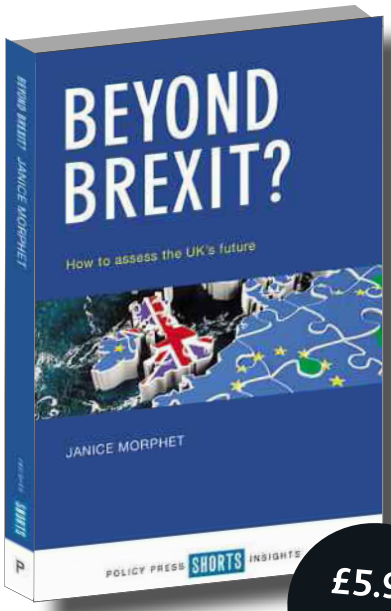

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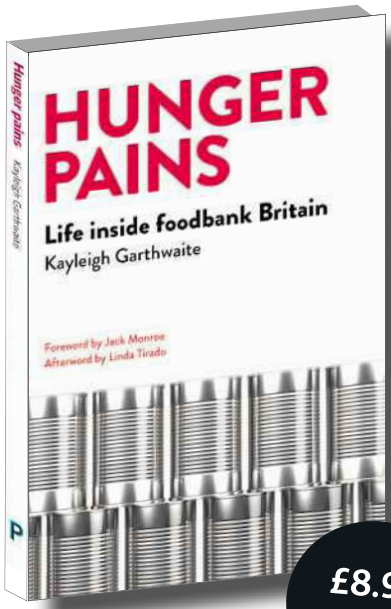

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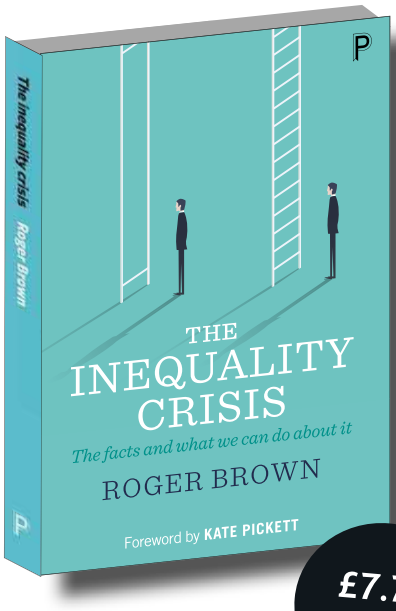

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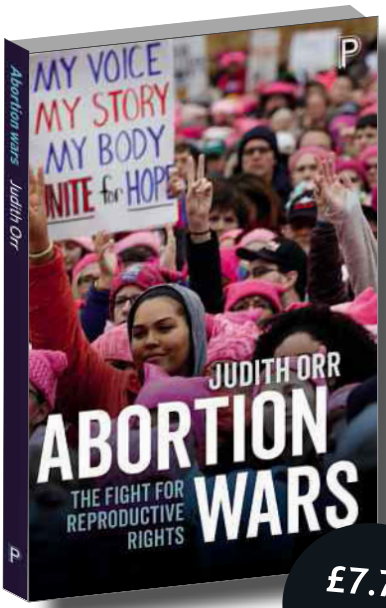

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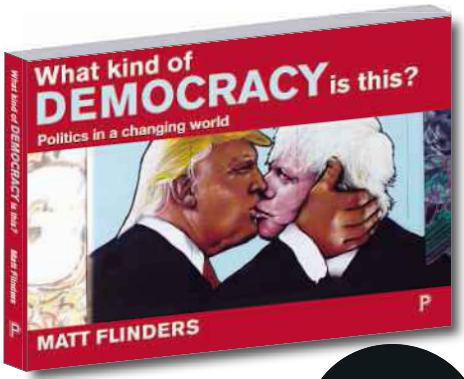

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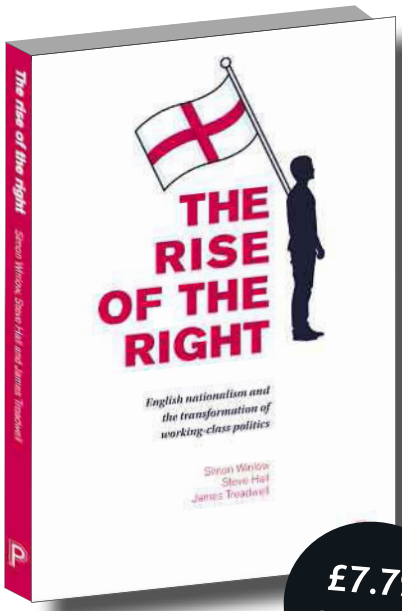

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Hinzelmann: the German Gef?

SD TUCKER argues that, among his many other talents, Gef the Talking Mongoose might also have been able to *sprechen eine bisschen Deutsch*.

With the publication of Christopher Josiffe's brilliant new book about Gef the Talking Mongoose, there has been a lot about this amusing little animal in *FT* recently. However, I think I might have one more obscure parallel with the case which has often been missed. [1] In a 2016 book [2] I briefly compare Gef to a Teutonically famous fairy-like polt (or polt-like fairy, if you prefer) known as Hinzelmann of Hudemühlen. Hinzelmann was a *kobold*, a sort of German house-sprite, who haunted Hudemühlen Castle in Lower Saxony from 1584 to 1588, playing tricks upon the occupants. Today the original haunting has become a much-loved German folk tale, accruing many obviously invented elements down the years. Semi-fictional or not, however, it seems Hinzelmann was a very similar entity to Gef. Notably, Hinzelmann was able to manifest in a variety of forms, including "a figure like that of a black marten" – which, like Gef, could talk. The tale goes that, one day, a group of men came to the Castle and tried to stab the invisible *spuk* with their rapiers, a task in which they failed; as they left the room, Hinzelmann mockingly appeared in animal-shape and sarcastically laughed "Ha ha! How well you caught me!" (Gef was also very proud of escaping human snares.) I know that a marten isn't precisely the same thing as a mongoose or the "ghost in the form of a weasel" Gef sometimes claimed to be, but to laymen these animals all look very much alike. Upon several occasions Hinzelmann was also

supposed to have left "a very small depression, as if a cat had been there" on the Castle's beds – further evidence of his Gef-like nature? [3]

The German sprite initially manifested by making typical polt-like noises from inside walls, before later developing a voice, much as Gef did. Hinzelmann used this voice to give himself an autobiography every bit as dubious as Gef's claim to have been originally born in Delhi on 7 June 1852; according to Hinzelmann, he was a human being, who had been born in the Bohemian Mountains and had a wife named Hille Bingels. By his own account, he had fallen out with friends with whom he had been living in a forest and was only seeking temporary refuge until such time as he could make up with them. When asked if he was a *kobold* or a *polter geyst*, Hinzelmann heartily denied it, saying: "What have these to do with me? They are the Devil's spectres, and I do not belong to them! I am a Christian like any other man and I hope to be saved." Compare this to what Gef replied when asked if he was a poltergeist: "I am not like one of those." Again, the brownie-like Hinzelmann could also eat, at least sort of: "The servants… were obliged every day to prepare a dish full of sweet-meat, with crumbs of wheaten bread, and place it upon his little table… What was put on his plate vanished... But the food was afterwards found lying under the benches, or in a corner of the room." Gef, too, was supposed to pinch bacon, leave teeth-marks in butter and pilfer biscuits from jars. Once, some stolen carrots were found under a bed; Gef said he had vomited them up, but had he? He was *heard* eating, but was this just a put-on, as with Hinzelmann? I am reminded of the 1927-30 Poona haunting in Gef's original homeland of India, where some fruit, left out as a peace-offering, was apparently eaten by the ghost to the accompaniment of lip-smacking noises; the polt later flung the "skins, scraped clean… with teeth-marks clearly visible on them" at its victims. [4] But again, this sounds like pure pantomime. The fact that Gef apparently stole food is not a *definite* indication that he was a physical flesh-and-blood creature.

Thomas Keightley's 1828 folklore classic *The Fairy Mythology: Illustrative of the Romance and Superstition of Various Countries* features a longer account of Hinzelmann's activities. I wonder if any members of the Irving family, who were at the centre of the Gef case, might have read it themselves or spoken to some other Manxmen on the famously fairy-mad isle who had? If so, this need not be seen as an indication of fakery. If poltergeists really are ideoplastic in nature, as some have theorised, taking on the ostensible form of brownies in areas where brownies are still believed in, then perhaps Gef adopted some of the aspects of his German cousin because, in some weird way, this was how he would have been expected to manifest. Or maybe Gef, being an extra-clever talking mongoose, had read Keightley's book himself. Today, a variant-form of Hinzelmann has returned to the public's consciousness as a character who demands child-sacrifices in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* novel and TV series. If Gef has been reading that too, let's hope he hasn't picked up any similar urges next time he chooses to appear to someone like young Voirrey Irving...

NOTES

1 In fact, Josiffe does briefly mention a 1936 French magazine article which also apparently linked Gef and Hinzelmann. (Christopher Josiffe, *Gef! The Strange Tale of an Extra-Special Talking Mongoose*, Strange Attractor Press, 2017, pp198-9).

2 SD Tucker, *The Hidden Folk: Are Fairies and Poltergeists Just the Same Thing?*, CFZ Press, 2016, pp311-313.

3 There is both an anonymous 1704 pamphlet and a 1965 book by the German folklorist Will-Erich Peuckert which are alike entitled entitled *Der Vielförmige Hintzelmann*, or 'The Many Shapes/Colours of Hinzelmann', which I would hope might feature some further details about Hinzelmann's marten/weasel-like form, but I can't read enough German to tell! ('Hinzelmann', as a diminutive form of 'Heinrich', is also a generic term for German fairies, akin to the English 'Robin', so these texts may not only describe the Hudemühlen sprite).

4 Harry Price, *Poltergeist Over England*, Country Life, 1945, pp367–8; Alan Gauld & Tony Cornell, *Poltergeists*, Routledge Kegan-Paul, 1979, p106

SD TUCKER writes regularly for FT, and is the author of the recently published book *Space Oddities: Our Strange Attempts to Explain the Universe*, amongst several others.

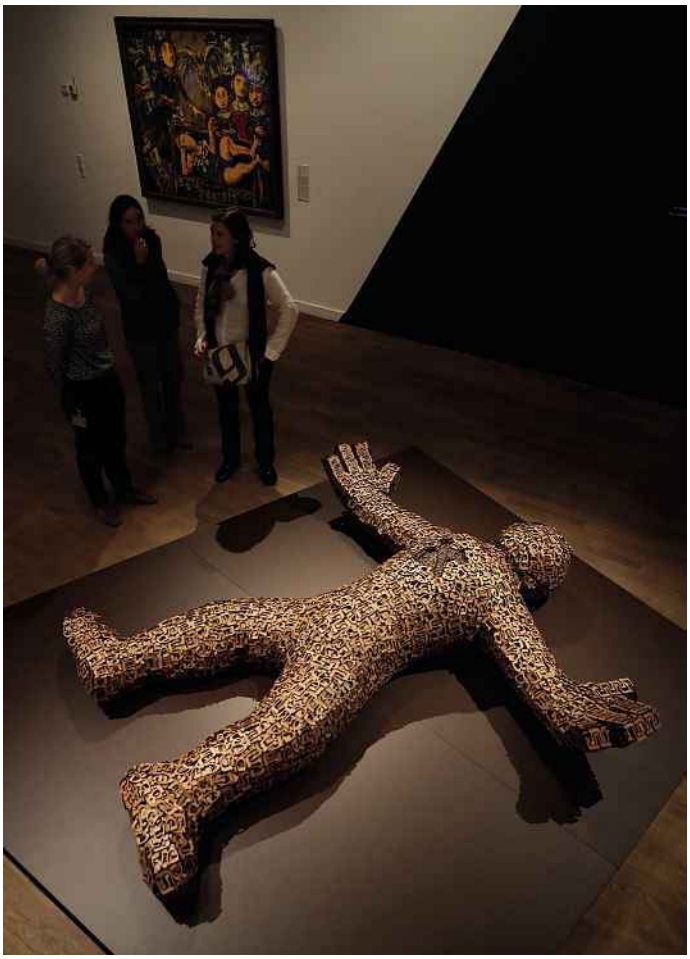
The Golem walks among us!

MICHAEL BARRON tracks the transformation of the soulless 'dummy' of mediæval Jewish folklore to 21st century multimedia superstar...

What do Jesus Christ, Carole King, Buddy Holly and Eva Peron have in common with The Golem? They have all been the subject of acclaimed stage shows or musicals.

Three years ago, the 1927 theatre company staged what the *Evening Standard* described as "the most magical show in town": *Golem*. It was still being toured in the UK as late as October 2017 and continues to play internationally. The show's star can certainly be accused of being a soulless, manmade creation, but he is no lumbering fool – more of a manipulator and control freak, creating the perception that he is making people's lives easier by taking away the factors that appear to cause stress, unhappiness and underachievement. However, the story's characters end up far more depressed and miserable as a result of the Golem's actions; and, each time, the Golem receives an upgrade before a new, improved, 'must-have' version of himself is released into the world. It was a smart, satirical updating of the Jewish Golem myth – in which a magical being is created from inanimate mater – for our times. (For the most famous version, Rabbi Loew and the Golem of Prague, see **FT238:30-37**)

Even when the Golem isn't the central character, he makes his presence felt, as in Peter Ackroyd's 1994 novel, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*. This year, Ackroyd's novel has been made into a successful international film, *The Limehouse Golem*, featuring Bill Nighy and Olivia Cooke.



SEAN GALLUP / GETTY IMAGES

New York City boasts a klezmer-rock band called Golem

The Golem's popularity in the 21st century isn't confined to the theatre and the cinema. You'll find him shambling through comic books and graphic novels, modern literature, music, advertising, Pokémon, Kickstarter campaigns, Craigslist, scientific theories, cryptocurrency, television, YouTube channels and computer games.

COMICS

The Golem is no stranger to Marvel Comics, appearing in flashback sequences in *The Incredible Hulk* #134 from December 1970. The story finds the jade giant in Central Europe, where he is mistaken for the mythical monster by a little girl and helps her father's resistance movement overthrow a dictator. The Marvel version of the Golem later lumbered into *Strange Tales* #174, 176 and 177 in 1974. A friendlier incarnation of the monster was *Mendy and the Golem*, which appeared in the early 1980s, billed as "The World's Only Kosher Comic Book"; a revived version is still around today. In 2003, Israeli comic book writers Eli Eshed and Uri Fink created *The Golem,*

LEFT: A Golem exhibition at Berlin's Jewish Museum in 2016. **FACING PAGE:** Marvel's Golem in 1974.

otherwise known as Yossi Stein, protector of the Jewish people against their enemies, including the Black Nazi, numerous demons and a vampire from Transylvania.

A notable graphic novel presenting a history of "a racially divided America" is James Sturm's *The Golem's Mighty Swing*. In 1920s America, the Stars of David baseball club, a team of itinerant Jewish baseball players, suffer financial woes until a promoter suggests that the team's black clean-up hitter wear a Golem costume in order to drum up interest. It works, but at the same time anti-Semitism soars, with one newspaper editor writing that the team must "vanquish" the Jews, whom he portrays as greedy individualists poised to suck the money out of the town.

LITERATURE, DRAMA AND FILM

In 2012, Jewish Book Week, the second oldest literary festival in the UK after Cheltenham, celebrated its 60th anniversary. While the festival boasted high-profile guests like Deborah Lippstadt and Howard Jacobson, it was the Golem that featured most prominently in press releases. As well as a screening of the classic 1920 silent film *The Golem,* there were other adaptations, including, *The Golem of Wapping* at the Jewish Museum London.

While well-known to Jewish audiences, the Golem has gradually become embedded in wider popular literature. M Henderson Ellis's 2013 comic novel *Keeping Bedlam at Bay in The Prague Café,* is set in the Prague of the early 1990s and features "Golem scholars and trackers" who believe Golems are hiding in television sets; they follow what they believe to be a Golem, but it turns out to be a just a cash machine.

Other recent popular novels featuring the Golem include Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, (set in 1940s Prague and Brooklyn), Jonathan and Jesse Kellerman's *The Golem of Hollywood* (highly praised by Stephen King) and Helene Wecker's *The Golem & the Jinni*; and let's not forget Terry Pratchett's slightly earlier *Feet of Clay.*

TV AND YOUTUBE

The Golem's fame has resulted in it making guest appearances on popular television shows. A male and female Golem appear in the 2006 *Simpsons* episode "Treehouse of Horror XVII" The BBC's *Sherlock* episode "The Great Game" features an assassin called 'the Golem'. In the fantasy/horror series *Supernatural*, a Golem is used by a secret association of rabbis in episode "Everybody Hates Hitler", as well as turning up in episode 10 of the show *Sleepy Hollow*. YouTube animation creators such as Sam Green, with his 'Epic Minequest' series, and Bootstrap Buckaroo have made comedy shorts receiving millions of views featuring Golems. Bootstrap Buckaroo's *Cooking with the Iron Golem* features a Golem who disastrously fails to cook a variety of foods.

MUSIC

A number of bands have taken the name Golem over the years, ranging from the 1970s Krautrockers to the current German death metal outfit. New York City boasts a klezmer-rock band called Golem, formed in 2000 and still going strong. Many influential musicians, including Gary Lucas (Jeff Buckley) and Francis Black (The Pixies), have created their own soundtracks to the original 1920 classic silent film.

GAMES

The global Japanese anime series and trading card game featuring Pikachu, Charizard, Blastoise and others also features the Golem (in both male and female forms), a turtle-like bipedal Pokémon with plated green rocks as its shell that seems to owe more to

Chinese mythology than Hebrew legend. The Golem also appears in computer game *Minecraft*, where players break and place blocks to build structures to protect against nocturnal monsters.[1]

KICKSTARTER AND CRAIGSLIST

The online Kickstarter platform that raises money for creative independent projects has seen some interesting Golem-related entries. One of the most successful to date is *Golem Arcana*, a table-top strategy game that uses classic miniatures (Golems, Knights and Ancient Ones) but harnesses your mobile phone or tablet to remove the hassle of working out points scored, manual record keeping or even remembering the rules; brilliant! Other successfully funded Golem projects include a graphic novel by Hilary Goldstein, and the sci-fi game *Necropunk Pathfinder*.

Craigslist, the classified advertisements website, has become a household name. Weird Al Yankovitch wrote a song about it in 2009, but it was in 2010 that Craigslist shocked the world with a wanted advert. The advertiser, from Queens, New York City, specifically requested:

"One Rabbi versed in the Dark Talmudic Arts to create one Golem for household of three. Golem will perform rudimentary household chores such as dishes & sweeping, basic Math Tutoring for our daughter in 3rd grade and basic household security. Golem must be obedient and fairly unobtrusive on our every-day lives.

We will supply all materials needed (clay, twigs, calfskin parchment, etc) needed to create the Golem. All you need to do is use your magical ancient Rabbinic skills to animate said Golem."

Please note! We are looking for a Rabbi to create a Golem: an anthropomorphic being created from inanimate matter from Jewish folk-lore, NOT Gollum: a former Hobbit turned into monster and looking for 'precious'. This is important! We have no interest in living with Gollum. We want a Golem. Please respond, serious inquiry only."

SCIENCE

According to Harry Collins, Professor of Sociology, and Trevor Pinch, a Science and Technology Professor, "Science is a Golem".[2] Referencing Jewish mythology, they describe the creature as a humanoid that will "follow orders [and] do your work". Czech Playwright Karel Capek first used the term "robot" (coined by his brother Josef) in his 1920 play *R.U.R* (Rossum's Universal Robot). Robot is derived from the Czech word *robota*, a term that means forced or serf labour. In *R.U.R*, robots revolt against their masters and destroy humanity. Collins and Pitch warn that "without control, a Golem may destroy its masters with its flailing vigour". Nonetheless, Pitch and Collins suggest we don't blame the Golems: their mistakes are our own mistakes. Interestingly, Gershom Sholem, a scholar and specialist in Jewish mysticism, discussed the analogy between the Golem and artificial intelligence as early as 1965. He gave an Israeli mainframe computer the name 'Golem Aleph', expressing his hope that the machine would remain peaceful.[3] These days, we have GOLEM (Gene Ontology Local Exploration Map), an interactive, graph-based gene-ontology navigation and analysis tool software tool for biologists.[4]

CRYPTOCURRENCY

The Golem Network, which has been referred to as the "AirBnb for computers", offers a decentralised way of providing large amounts of CPU (central processing unit) cheaply. Users rent out the CPU and get back Golem Network Tokens (GNT), which are Ethereum crypto coins. Potential uses include users being able to create artificial intelligence (AI) and/or speed up its learning processes, make large mathematical computations and create CGI for movies and cartoons quickly and cheaply.[5] The movie Avatar reportedly cost $237 million to make, much of the spend being on CGI. Now, 20th Century Fox could use the Golem network and rent out CPU power at a fraction of the cost (and time). So how successful is Golem? On 11 November 2016, Golem's crowdfunding event became the second fastest in crypto history, raising $8,600,000 in 29 minutes. The currency since went on to peak as the 10th most valuable crypto coin.[6]

CONCLUSION

From its biblical debut (Psalms 139:15-16 – "my unshaped form") and use as a synonym for "dummy" (possibly as a derivative of *gelem*, meaning "raw material"), the Golem appears to be enjoying a new lease of life: as matter for books, television and films, inspiration for musicals and festivals, a character in games, a metaphor for science, and even as a poster-boy for diving equipment.[7]

NOTES

1 For anyone interested in learning how to build Golems in Minecraft see: www.youtube.com/watch?v=18_Alny76D8

2 Harry M Collins and Trevor Pinch, *The Golem: What You Should Know About Science*, 1993.

3 http://cobinagillitt.com/GLM/associations/golemaleph.html

4 www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1618863/

5 www.wired.com/2017/03/initial-coin-offering-stock-thats-not-stock/; https://steemit.com/beyondbitcoin/@cryptowallet/what-is-golem; https://golem.network/index.html

6 https://cointelegraph.com/news/golem-is-10th-most-valuable-crypto

7 www.golemgear.com/

MICHAEL BARRON writes for *XS Noise* and has written extensively for the *Jewish News* and *Essex Jewish News*.

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A refreshing swig of immortality

An eclectic and fascinating look at Vajrayana Buddhism's 'secrets' exposes an entire culture of esoteric alchemy and decodes its iconography to reveal elixirs, flying saints and secret languages

Secret Drugs of Buddhism

Mike Crowley

Amrita Press 2016

Pb, 400pp, illus, colour plates, bib, refs, ind, $24.95, ISBN 9780692652817

One of the joys of reviewing books is that once in a while a book comes along that not only strikes out in a new direction but also presents new information and personal experience in an absorbing and accessible manner – in this case the historical, cultural and ritual use of entheogenic 'sacraments' (i.e. plant extracts that "generate the divine within") in chiefly Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism.

Mike Crowley has been a contributor to *FT* since the early days and so the pleasure I feel in hailing his work is greater because it originates with one of 'our own' – indeed, the book is dedicated to our late pal Steve Moore, who aided Mike with some research and discussions, and who edited an early chapter of this book when it appeared in *Fortean Studies 3* (1996).

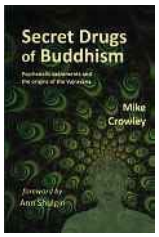
This book is not the product of academic scholarship; it is the remarkable result of one man's private research, curiosity and intelligence. He is clearly at ease with his subject matter whether it be strange Tibetan gods or the exotic flora of one of the remotest regions on Earth and is sharing his own enjoyment of its exotic nature with the reader. It may well attract comparisons with Carlos Castaneda's well-known canon on the use of plant psychedelics among the Hispanic *brujos* or sorcerers, but Mike's exposition is different. There is no mythologising of his experience of psychoactive drugs and lamaic initiations. Instead, an early chapter is a delightfully chatty introduction about himself and his early drug use, leading up to the reasons why he adopted Buddhism (and its Vajrayana variant) as his life's interest and philosophy.

Mike is serious where it is needed, providing a pretty solid scholarly apparatus: a glossary of unfamiliar words; a cultural pre-history showing the interrelationship of the principal countries; and a brilliantly concise account of the genesis of the two main streams of Buddhism, Mahayana and Vajrayana, which evolved out of the Buddha's original teachings. Mike is keenly aware of how alien this subject matter might seem to folk coming to it for the first time, so he even provides a guide on how to read the book, and an explanation of the bewildering alphabet soup that is the transliteration of Tibetan Chinese and Sanskrit terms.

The introduction also prepares the reader for some of the key ideological peculiarities of the practice of Vajrayana tantrism, which differs significantly from Vedic (Indian) tantrism. One of these 'secrets' is the precise nature of *amrita*, the so-called 'elixir of immortality' which is dispensed by a lama at the beginning of every major ritual and consumed by all participants. In the Vedic tradition, it was called *soma*, and corresponded to an essential part of the diet of every Hindu god. As Mike points out, the word amrita forms part of the title of many Vajrayana scriptures, and part of the names of many of its deities, as well as describing the spiritual essence visualised in meditations… yet the nature, origin and history of this divine

"Amrita, the 'elixir of immortality', is dispensed by a lama at every major ritual"

elixir are rarely discussed and never explained. Depictions of Tibetan saints flying in the sky, holding a skull-cup of amrita aloft while embracing their naked female counterpart, is but one of the iconographic puzzles decoded here. Mike attempts to remedy this sacred ellipsis by deciphering a series of clues from the iconography of particular deities, their associated meditational instructions, thus identifying the plants or fungi involved, and therefore their entheogenic properties. Here is the real meat of the book: a set of closely reasoned and intensely detailed and illustrated essays on the interrelated elements of literary, artistic, mythological, hagiographical and initiatory clues. There is only space here for an outline: on amrita itself; on the relationship between Vishnu and Rahu, the soma thief; the eight *siddhis* (magical powers) and their initiations; the iconography of peacocks; parasol deities; of wheels and 'head-bumps'; Tibet and its saints as heirs to Indian Buddhism; the role of dung, urine and other "unlikely foods"; goddesses and their trees; the *dakinis* and their icons. A concluding section holds an equally eclectic set of essays on subjects including drug sacraments; a guide to psychedelics; the guru's urine; women's 'secrets' (including secret languages); the three great "vehicles" of entheogenic Buddhism; the "Five Great Meats". The final essay in this section on magic pills, their formulas and ingredients is an astonishing feat of scholarship. One involves nearly 300 esoteric ingredients (many of which are magic pills which have been in the presence of holy relics).



Mike Crowley, with this book, pulls aside the curtain to expose an entire culture of esoteric alchemy, dedicated to the refinement of divine archetypes within the psyche. It is no wonder that, through centuries, there has been a steady flow of seekers (including Pythagoras) after many different forms of knowledge from the West to India and Tibet. The correspondences between the Græco-Roman and the Indo-European pantheons are well known but, as Mike reminds us, much that is less obvious was hidden behind the iconography of plants and fungi, skulls and animal 'totems'. It may be no coincidence that the earliest embodiment of pre-Olympic, pre-Titanic Hekate, in the Caria of Anatolia (on a main route to India) is as a goddess of herbs and poisons; along with the use of fire, this could possibly be our earliest technology. We might reasonably ask what else those early philosophical tourists brought back that remained a "secret teaching". This book should excite forteans; it leads to profound questions about how archaic cultures may have engineered their spirituality, and is also a darned good read.

Bob Rickard

★★★★★

Go on, give us a smile…

The quest for pearly gnashers is nothing new, though we no longer see them as a sign of mental purity (or as a preventative for Bolshevism)

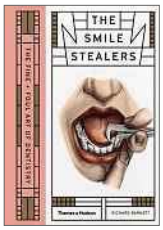
The Smile Stealers

The Fine and Foul Art of Dentistry

Richard Barnett

Thames & Hudson 2016
Hb, 256pp, illus, ind, £19.95, ISBN 9780500519110

For some of us of a certain age, Christian Szell's torturous dental procedure on Babe Levy in *Marathon Man* (1976) encapsulates our uneasy relationship with dentists. "Is it safe?" still evokes a shudder. But we grit our teeth and rely on dentists to manage or prevent dental problems. However, as this wonderful book shows, dentistry is about more than medicine: it reflects and reinforces social norms.



Barnett, for instance, examines the long search for effective relief from tooth pain. Some 5,000 years ago, Chinese medical texts suggested crushing roast garlic between the teeth. The crushed garlic was mixed with horseradish seeds or saltpetre and human milk to form a paste. The patient then pushed a plug of paste into the nostril on the opposite side to the pain. Crushing a raw garlic clove around a sore tooth is a traditional European remedy that I've used on occasion.

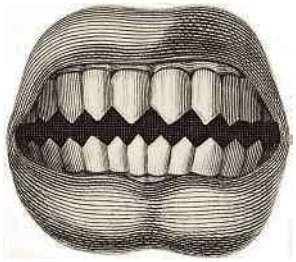
Healers in 15th century Italy removed decayed dentine, treated the exposed pulp with arsenic, then pressed layers of gold foil firmly into the cavity. The filling could save a tooth and last for years. But it took hours and fillings didn't become a dental mainstay until the development of anæsthesia.

Early dentistry could, however, go spectacularly wrong. In 1685, Louis XIV needed his upper right molars pulled. But they proved stubborn and, Barnett recounts, the puller "ripped away a great deal of the patient's upper jaw, knocking a hole through his palate and into his nasal passages". When the king drank or gargled, fluid came from his nose "like a fountain". The king's leading surgeon used a red-hot iron to close the hole – the pain must have been horrendous.

Some people went to what now seems extraordinary lengths to replace lost teeth. In the 18th century, for instance, dentists made dentures from teeth pulled from dead soldiers or, more commonly, from corpses acquired by body snatchers. Dentists also transplanted live teeth pulled from healthy but poor people into the rich who paid 10 or 20 guineas. The poor got a "few coins" or at best a couple of guineas for a front tooth. The transplants rarely lasted more than a year or two, but condemned the donor to a lifetime of problems.

Modern dentistry, of course, goes beyond filling, pulling and prevention. Dentists perform cosmetic procedures, for example, to whiten, straighten and reshape teeth. But there's nothing new in the search for a perfect smile.

For years, people believed that the mouth offered a window into the mind and soul. In the 18th century, for example, the Swiss physiognomist Johann Kaspar Lavater – a practitioner of the then widely accepted idea that facial characteristics revealed character – said that "clean, white and well-arranged teeth… [show] a sweet and polished mind and a good and honest heart". As late as 1923, an American dentist remarked that "proper care of the teeth obviates the mental explosions that cause Bolshevism".



In 18th century France, people began consulting dentists when they were not in pain to address the perceived "perils of the ugly mouth in a society obsessed with surfaces". This strikes me as a case of *plus ça change*. Like our magazines and TV adverts, 18th century publications promoted tooth powders and whiteners, mouthwashes, breath sweeteners, toothpicks, tongue scrapers and toothbrushes.

Yet, Barnett eloquently shows, cosmetic dentistry is culturally determined. Tribes in Bopoto, northern Congo, and the Bagobo in the Philippines traditionally sharpen their teeth. Some Japanese girls undergo the Yaeba procedure. The dentists cap the upper canine to case a crooked tooth that looks a bit like a fang – the Japanese associate a quirky smile with "innocence and youthfulness".

The Smile Stealers is the latest in a trilogy following *The Sick Rose* and *Crucial Interventions* (see **FT315:61 & 345:58**), all of which are packed with fascinating facts and anecdotes, and profusely illustrated with images that'll make you squirm. They've been consistently excellent as well as intellectual and æsthetic delights.

And *The Smile Stealers* is highly recommended as a book you can – ahem – really get your teeth into.

Mark Greener

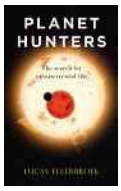
★★★★☆

Planet Hunters

The Search for Extraterrestrial Life

Lucas Ellerbroek

Reaktion Books 2017
Hb, 268 pp, notes, bib, ind, £16.95, ISBN 9781780238142



Over the last few years I've read quite a few books about aspects of the scientific search for extraterrestrial life, and I've spotted a pattern. With one outstanding exception (Ben Miller's brilliant *The Aliens are Coming!*), they're rather dull. This new book by Lucas Ellerbroek, focusing on the hunt for Earth-like planets around other stars, is a case in point.

A subject like this ought to be a gift to a popular science writer. Most readers won't need persuading that it's an important area of study that deserves to have money and resources thrown at it. On top of that, it's a perfect example of the scientific method.

The basic hypothesis – the existence of exoplanets – isn't directly observable, but some of its knock-on consequences are. So you design experiments to look for these consequences, and then build cutting-edge technology, like the Kepler spacecraft, to carry them out.

The excitement lies in the "how" and "why" of the subject. and Miller's book worked so well because he made a real effort to explain these aspects. In contrast, Ellerbroek chooses a plodding historical narrative, interspersed with pen-portraits of the ordinary, down-to-Earth (read "boring") researchers involved. He never really gets to grips with the science or engineering of the subject, let alone its philosophical or cultural implications.

The book is also woefully under-illustrated, with no photos and just one line drawing. Having had all these tedious scientists forced on me, I would have liked to see what they look like – not to mention the spacecraft and telescopes used to search for exoplanets, and artists' impressions of how they might look if we could see them properly.

Andrew May

★★★☆☆

Paperbacks from Hell

The Twisted History of 70's and 80's Horror Fiction

Grady Hendrix

Quirk Books 2017
Pb, 234pp, illus, ind, £19.99, ISBN 9781594749810

The paperback horror boom of the 1970s and 1980s unleashed a flood of terrifying fiction on readers, not just from big names like Stephen King, Clive Barker, Anne Rice or Ramsey Campbell, but from numerous lesser-known or even pseudonymous writers. Some of it was revolutionary, some of it was forgettable, and some of it was endearingly bonkers. And almost all of it was adorned with bold, often shocking cover art.

The cover art and the loopy content are the main topics of Grady Hendrix's *Paperbacks from Hell*, an affectionate overview of the genre, its history and its major figures. In eight themed chapters and a brief appendix, he describes the beginning and end of the boom and some of its major trends, zooming in to examine particularly significant writers, artists or themes. Most chapters are subdivided into shorter segments: the chapter on occult themes, for instance, includes short sections on Jewish themes in horror fiction, the importance of *Michelle Remembers*, race consciousness in exorcism fiction, the work of Michael Avellone, and more.

The short sections mean that this is more of an overview than an encyclopædia, something like an art book or exhibit guide. Hendrix's tone complements this; reading this book is rather like asking a fannish friend to tell you their favourite funny stories about the object of their obsession. Hendrix sets the tone with the tale of finding *The Little People*, John Christopher's underappreciated novel of psychic Nazi sex leprechauns, in a box of discount used books. This humour – the affectionate, half-serious teasing of a fan who loves how bizarre the subject is – runs throughout the book.

With its lavish illustrations, engaging tone and short, memorable sections, *Paperbacks from Hell* is a great introduction to the era and an enjoyable read for anyone who remembers the lurid paperback covers of the boom period.

James Holloway

★★★★☆

The Fearless Benjamin Lay

The Quaker Dwarf Who Became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist

Marcus Rediker

Verso Books 2017
Hb, 224pp, illus, notes, ind, £17.99, ISBN 9781786634719

The smallest of men can achieve the greatest achievements but still be virtually unheard of. Benjamin Ley was a Quaker dwarf and the first Revolutionary Abolitionist, yet somehow has been written out of most books on slavery and its abolition.

Marcus Rediker, author of *The Fearless Benjamin Lay*, takes pains to address this injustice.

Born of humble origins in Copford, Essex, he landed in Barbados and saw the full brutality of slavery, which changed his view of the world and his path in life.

As a Quaker he fought against his own church. What becomes apparent is not only how ahead of his time his philosophy on slavery was, but also how fearless he was in his accusations of the Church, the government, his fellow Quakers and the rich society that thrived on the slave trade. His guerrilla tactics included spilling a bladder of blood over Quaker members and kidnapping a slave-owner's child: Slavery was wrong and it should be abolished no matter the cost. Though excommunicated from his own church in England and at odds with the Philadelphia brethren, he refused to capitulate.

Despite his diminutive height, Benjamin had a huge personality. He was sometimes bull-headed and overzealous, but always ahead of his times. His life as a sailor had made him open-minded: he believed in the equality of women and that they carried the divine word.

He eventually wrote his own book about slavery, *All Slave Keepers that Keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates*, which was published by Benjamin Franklin.

Rediker draws heavily on primary historical sources. At one stage Lay seems to have been well-documented; we never really find out why a man that caused so much upheaval in social and religious areas suddenly is almost written out of history.

Marcus does consider the possibility that Benjamin was viewed as a deformed, hunchback, radical noisy dwarf and therefore his philosophy ridiculed and dismissed. His humble origins and the fact he was self-educated may also have had some bearing on why society did not take him seriously.

His uncompromising personality did not endear him to his fellow churchmen and his open criticism of Quakers owning slaves was seen as harassment. Ironically, the Quakers were in the end pivotal in the abolition movement against slavery.

Rediker successfully brings back to life in his book the spirit of Benjamin Ley and the little man ahead of his time fighting against the injustices of slavery, a man who encountered much in his short life but who was firm in his beliefs that slavery was an abomination.

Regardless of his stature and somewhat eccentric behaviour, he was ultimately one of the first revolutionary abolitionists and has every right to be restored to mainstream history books.

With *The Fearless Benjamin Ley*, Marcus goes a long way towards redressing the wrong. It is a fascinating book about an indomitable little person with a huge personality and should be used as a textbook for all those studying slavery and the abolition of slavery.

Lena Walton

★★★★☆

Tales From the Embassy

Communiques from the Guild of Transcultural Studies 1976–1991

Dave Tomlin

Strange Attractor Press 2017
Pb, 498pp, £15.99, ISBN 9781907222566

In Cambodia, 1975 was Year Zero, when Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge swept to power and did their level best to eradicate every trace of the culture that had come before. While the result there was predictably dystopian apocalypse, in London one of the side-effects was less predictable. The Khmer fanatics had little use for international relations, so the Cambodian embassy near Regent's Park was abandoned. Until 1976, that is, when a group of enterprising squatters took up residence, turning it into one of the last flowerings of the hippy era, The Guild of Transcultural Studies, a nexus for alternative action by hippy survivors.

Told in a series of lightly fictionalised anecdotes by ex-Third Ear Band member and veteran *International Times* contributor Dave Tomlin, *Tales from the Embassy* is a raconteurial history of this counter-cultural institution, from its foundation, until its eventual demise in 1991. Featuring many of the usual suspects from the early 70s alternative scene such as John Michell, Neil Oram and Harry Fainlight, it provides an authentic, if somewhat rambling, picture of the squat, from someone who was at the heart of it throughout its existence. Seemingly insulated from the cultural currents swirling around it (punk and rave seem to have no effect on the place) the Embassy provided a last outpost of 60s idealism and a refuge for a cast of eccentrics, misfits, mystics and dreamers who appear pseudonymously here (with a *dramatis personæ* at the back revealing their true identity). It harks back to a time when squatting was a viable way of life, at least semi-tolerated by officialdom, when you could still find something weird and interesting in Camden Lock market, and property in London was a place where real people lived, not a hotly-contested cash-cow for international investors.

Clocking in at nearly 500 pages, this is perhaps a book only cultural historians would want to read cover-to-cover, but as it is broken up into short and very readable anecdotes, it is splendid for dipping into. It is also a valuable record of the counter-culture by someone who made it through with his memory intact.

Ian Simmons

★★★★☆

And with a single leap he was gorn

The latest book on Spring-heeled Jack, Victorian bugaboo turned modern steampunk hero, is useful for its reproduced original documents, but marred by poor research and analysis

The Mystery Of Spring-Heeled Jack

From Victorian legend to Steampunk Hero

John Matthews

Destiny Books 2016

Pb, 342pp, illus, notes, ind, bib, $14.99,
ISBN 9781620554968

Spring-heeled Jack (SHJ) is a fortean perennial. He was a classic entity from the Victorian era that terrified his victims and escaped capture by huge leaps over high walls and between rooftops which led to the popular belief that he was a madman inventor who had springs in the heels of his boots.

Accurate information about SHJ is hard to find. Peter Haining's *The Legend And Bizarre Exploits Of Spring-Heeled Jack* (1997) can be considered an introductory text but is tainted by colourful exaggerations and, possibly, some accounts entirely fabricated by the author to spice the story up.

The best research work on SHJ is Mike Dash's 'Spring-heeled Jack: To Victorian Bugaboo from Suburban Ghost' in *Fortean Studies* Volume 3 (1996). Dash meticulously researched SHJ and included the full text of numerous original newspaper accounts, along with a detailed analysis of the reports. He included a chronology of sightings and attacks between 1803 and 1904, and another for comparable entities reported worldwide from the 1930s to the 1980s. Dash's lengthy article is the definitive SHJ work, but copies of *Fortean Studies* are neither easy nor cheap to get.

Matthews readily acknowledges that he has relied heavily on Dash's work. He even reproduces the same newspaper articles. The main benefit of this book is that it makes them more accessible to modern readers and researchers, but there is little else to recommend in it.

There is some coverage of SJH in popular culture (including a nice colour plate in the centre section of a 1960s advertisement for Spring-heel 'Jacks' shoes with springs). However, basic key word searches at free online newspaper archives like Trove and Papers Past bring up hits on articles about race horses, criminals, circus acts, cushioned women's shoes, etc. linked with the name – none of which are covered in this book.

Matthews also has no mention at all of dozens of scares involving leaping ghosts (including a Phosphorus Jack) dating from the late 1800s to the early 1900s. Again, many of these accounts can be found through basic searches of online newspaper archives.

Even more troubling is inaccuracies in his coverage of related entities. In a section on the Mothman who scared residents of Point Pleasant, West Virginia, in 1966 and 1967, he states that John Keel was "accused of faking much of his information." Keel may have lost objectivity when he became caught up in the excitement and paranoia while visiting the area and experienced strange events himself, but he interviewed multiple witnesses and it is completely unfounded to say he created fake Mothman reports.

On the very next page Matthews unnecessarily says Jerome Clarke and cryptozoologist Loren Coleman "claim to have interviewed many of those who sighted the Mothman". Why use the word claim? Clarke and Coleman – two of the most respected fortean researchers in the world – have travelled all over the USA for decades to interview witnesses to strange events and to investigate monsters and fortean mysteries firsthand. This sort of statement reeks of an armchair expert unfairly criticising the researchers who actually get their hands dirty out in the field by doing the legwork.

Matthews also states that folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand dismissed the Mothman stories as an urban legend in his book *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* (1983). In fact, Brunvand only did that a decade later in his 1993 book *The Baby Train*. It is important to note that Brunvand relied upon children's books about mysteries and a handful of newspaper clippings as he was unable to get hold of a copy of Keel's 1975 book *The Mothman Prophecies*. Hardly what could be called in-depth research.

The 2001 Indian Monkey-man panic that had many hallmarks of the SHJ hysteria is covered in barely half a page in scant detail and with no references. In contrast, the less relevant Internet-generated Slender Man meme has three-and-a-half-pages of coverage. Yet again there is no indication of any original research or investigation by Matthews.

Matthews does include some interesting background material about possible mythological connections to SHJ (Jack the giant killer, Jack Frost, Jack O'Lanterns, etc.) but I feel he is stretching the parallels by including Robin Hood.

The author biography on the back cover states that Matthews has written over 100 books. That is at the rate of two or more a year for his adult life – again an indication that not much original research effort could have gone into them.

The book also has some unfortunate typos that suggest it was written in haste. These include "folly of been frightened" (instead of being) in an original reproduced newspaper report and referring to a popular British radio show as having a "listenership of several thousand" – surely this is meant to be hundreds of thousands?

In summation, *The Mystery Of Spring-Heeled Jack* is useful to have to get access to the text of the original newspaper accounts about SHJ and has some nice illustrations, but has precious little original thought or research.

Those interested in SHJ who have a limited budget might be better off looking out for a second-hand copy of *Fortean Studies* Volume 3 or might prefer to buy one of the two recent SHJ books available on Amazon: *Spirits of an Industrial Age: Ghost Impersonation, Spring-heeled Jack, and Victorian Society* by Jacob Middleton (2014) and *The Legend of Spring-heeled Jack: Victorian Urban Folklore* and *Popular Cultures* by Karl Bell (2017).

Peter Hassall

★★☆☆☆

The SF and fantasy round-up

David V Barrett recommends an historical novel with a difference, a space opera and a fortean tale of murder, plus a lost girl mystery, seeing the Good People and Pompeiian time travel

Wonders Will Never Cease

Robert Irwin

Dedalus 2016
Pb, 391pp, £9.99, ISBN 9781910213476

The Rift

Nina Allan

Titan Books 2017
Pb, 421pp, £7.99, ISBN 978178560376

The Good People

Patrick Harpur

Strange Attractor Press 2017
Hb 256pp, £25, Pb, 256pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781907222405

Empire of Time

Daniel Godfrey

Titan Books 2017
Pb, 464pp, £7.99, ISBN 9781785653155

Acadie

Dave Hutchinson

Tor 2017
Pb, 99pp, £8.99, ISBN 9780765398260

The Paranormal Investigations of Mr Charles Fort

TE Scott

via amazon 2016
Pb, 211pp, £8.99, ISBN 9781532708831

Robert Irwin's beautifully written *Wonders Will Never Cease* is an historical novel with a difference. All the characters and historical events are real, but beyond that… Anthony Woodville (brother of Elizabeth, who married the new King of England, Edward IV) dies in battle, seeing a vision of a sacred procession before he comes back to life. Throughout the book he has other visions, travels, strange encounters. But he also meets professional storytellers: the Augustinian canon and alchemist George Ripley, who spreads glorious but entirely made-up stories of Woodville's virtuous exploits, and a certain Sir Thomas Malory, whose tales of chivalrous valour interweave Woodville's own narratives – real, visionary and fictional. It's easy for the reader to become confused – and that's the point. How many "historical" accounts are massively mythologised, and is myth sometimes more meaningful than reality? Fortean questions indeed.

More confusion of reality. Teenager Julie disappears, leaving her younger sister Selena and their parents struggling to cope with her loss. Has she run away, or was she abducted or murdered? Could she, somehow, still be alive, as her father obsessively hopes? Twenty years later Serena receives a phone call; Julie is back, with a story of having fallen through a rift into another world – literally another planet, which she describes in some detail – its people, its places, its differences from life on Earth. Is it really Julie? How can Serena be sure? Her memories check out, but her story is impossible – or is it? Nina Allan's intriguing second novel *The Rift*, like her first, explores the nature of conflicting realities and unreliable (or perhaps multiverse) narration. Just who is Julie?

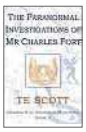
Patrick Harpur is well known to *FT* readers as the author of *Dæmonic Reality: a Field Guide to the Otherworld*. *The Good People* could be seen as a novelisation of that ground-breaking work. (A maverick priest in the novel suggests giving a talk on "Demons of the air: the dæmonic nature of reality".) The Good People are, of course, the Fair Folk, the Others – or perhaps, today, sightings of UFOs, often with a spiritual aspect to the experience. When two women in west London see a strange cube in the sky in the summer of 1989, their lives are turned upside down. We follow them as they try to come to terms with what they saw, interpreting it in very different ways – and how their inexplicable experience changes the way they view the world and affects their relationship with others. Harpur's writing style, slow and measured, really quite formal, takes some getting used to; but it's worth the effort.

Many of the population of Pompeii were rescued just before the eruption of Vesuvius in Daniel Godfrey's *New Pompeii*, and brought forward in time to a recreated city today. In the sequel *Empire of Time*, 15 years later, Nick Houghton has the role of ambassador between the city and the outside world, visiting nearby Naples frequently, but spends most of his life living in New Pompeii as Decimus Horatius Pullus. The most powerful woman in New Pompeii, Calpurnia, is trying to get the time-travelling equipment working again so she can rescue her husband from the past; her teenage son Marcus and her bodyguard have ambitious plans of their own. And who is sending messages from the future? Bringing anyone forward from the past could rewrite history, and Nick/Pullus is caught between different increasingly brutal factions in both of his worlds – a slave's life has little value, and assassination has long been a useful tool in Roman democracy. It's a more satisfying read than the first book, though there are some irritatingly untied loose ends.

Dave Hutchinson has, after many years of quiet endeavour, finally achieved the acclaim he richly deserves with his complex and utterly believable novels of a fractured Europe (*Europe in Autumn* and its sequels). *Acadie* is totally different from his usual work: a delightful space opera novella.

The narrator Duke is the unwilling president of a small colony of spacefarers who left Earth behind centuries ago; many of them have adapted themselves physically. When they shoot down a small probe that comes into their space, they know that Earth has finally found them; Duke has to organise a mass evacuation of the entire colony before Earth sends ships to wipe them out. But when another Earth probe arrives, is all as it seems…?

Often I complain that a novel is too long; I'd have liked this one to be much longer – it's great fun, with a superb kick in the tail.



Self-published books are becoming more and more common, so let's end with a novel with clear fortean connections. In TE Scott's *The Paranormal Investigations of Mr Charles Fort* a young civil servant is employed by a British government department to work with Fort as consultants to investigate possibly paranormal murders, shortly after the First World War.

The interaction between the two characters is often amusing; Fort's arrogance, short temper and odd sense of humour seem quite believable, and one feels for his long-suffering wife.

The cases are interesting and the storytelling fairly good, but the book suffers badly from many of the usual problems of self-published books: poor layout, copy-editing and proof-reading.

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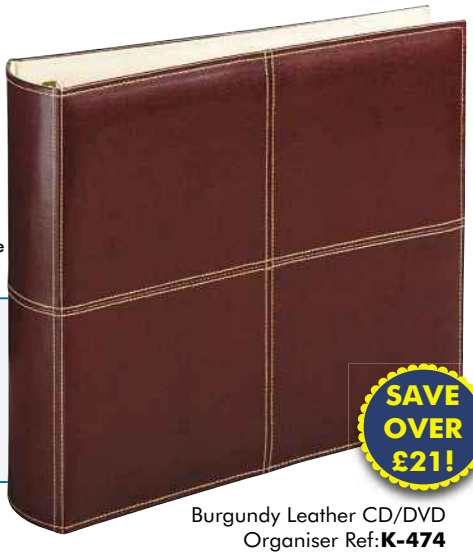

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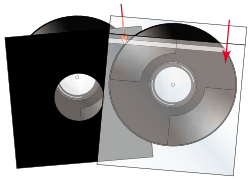

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A win for the Losers' Club

An accomplished blend of nostalgia and terror (not to mention a nightmare for coulrophobes), this latest adaptation succeeeds in capturing the essence of one of Stephen King's best-loved books

It

Dir Andy Muschietti, US 2017
On UK release

As I was a kid in the 1990s, there are certain pop-culture phenomena that will always stay with me. From the one-liners from *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* being quoted to death during recess to rushing home from school to catch the latest episode of *Are You Afraid of the Dark?*, I have as many rose-tinted memories of Nineties film and TV as most of my generation; and I'm sure that many of my peers will also be able to recall how they were traumatised by the TV miniseries *Stephen King's It*. I remember seeing it several times, but I also remember that it was popular for kids to *dare* each other to watch it. Sure enough, most kids cockily accepted the challenge and often came to regret it. You see, the Danish national broadcasting service would show two-part miniseries every week, with the first episode airing Monday night at 10pm after the evening news and the second episode at the same time the following evening. Thus, kids would arrive at school Tuesday morning with a sombre look on their face after an uneasy night's sleep thanks to Tim Curry's iconic, coulrophobia-inducing performance. However, if they decided to brave the second half of the miniseries, they would arrive at school with a different facial expression on Wednesday morning: namely one of disappointment. As good as the first part of the miniseries is, the second half is a letdown, mainly because Tim Curry was the heart and soul of an otherwise mediocre production, and the lack of his presence in the second part makes it incredibly cheesy.

Word of a new adaptation was met with much scepticism

The lasting impact and popularity of Tim Curry's Pennywise meant that word of a new adaptation of King's behemoth shocker was met with much scepticism. However, as the release date drew nearer and the marketing campaign worked its magic, people began to warm to the idea of a new, R-rated take on the horror classic, and *It* thankfully succeeds well beyond clever marketing and increased gore. Being updated to take place in the late 1980s, there were understandable concerns that the film was merely going to be a cash grab riding the successful nostalgia train currently led by *Stranger Things*; but this concern also turns out to be groundless. While *It* even shares one of its main cast members with *Stranger Things*, in the form of Finn Wolfhard, the film stands on its own merits and captures the essence of King's novel, making it easy for the audience to invest in the kids of The Losers' Club.

The young cast and their dynamic are essential in making the film work, and while the kids of the miniseries were also memorable and relatable, the Losers in the new *It* are allowed more depth, putting their chemistry and performances on a par with those of *Stand by Me*, *Super 8* and, indeed, *Stranger Things*. They behave and speak like real kids, with plenty of expletives and crude jokes from Wolfhard's Richie Tozier in particular, and their mannerisms never feel forced. Richie is not the main character, though, and the three Losers awarded the most screen time and character development are all very impressive. Jaeden Lieberher leads the pack as stuttering Bill Denborough, with another great performance that further attests to his talent. Jack Dylan Grazer is also good as Eddie Kaspbrak, serving as the preppy, hypochondriac contrast to Wolfhard's wise-cracking loudmouth Richie, with whom Grazer constantly and sassily spars. Sophia Lillis channels Molly Ringwald as she breathes new life into Beverly Marsh, portraying her as a multi-faceted character who is both confident and vulnerable, thereby adding renewed depth to the heart-breaking reality of Beverly's home life.

As for Bill Skarsgård's portrayal of Pennywise, those who are familiar with his other work know that this versatile actor is not only talented, but also fearless and invested in his work. Skarsgård does not seek to paraphrase Tim Curry's performance, instead making this incarnation of the killer clown entirely his own brand of eerie, unsettling, weird and scary. It is therefore not a case of who is the better

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

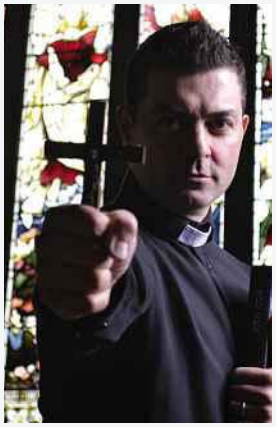
FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot! (www.theflicksthatchurchforgot.com)

Willard/Ben

Dir Daniel Mann, US 1982/Phil Karlson, US 1972
Second Sight, £34.99 (ltd edition box set), £19.99 each (Blu-ray), £15.99 each (DVD)

When a radio station plays the Michael Jackson track 'Ben', it feels right at home in the love-song hour. It's got a gentle feel, a pretty melody and the lyrics are sweet: "I used to say, I and me. Now it's us… now it's we." Aww. Many listeners, however – and this goes for all you karaoke crooners too – will have no idea they're hearing, or singing, a ballad addressed to a homicidal rat. Welcome to the weird world of *Willard* and *Ben*, a pair of killer rodent movies that lit up the world box office almost 50 years ago and have barely been seen since. This new Blu-ray release is the first time either film has appeared on home video since they screened in cinemas in 1971 and 1972. But strike up the band…because the rats are back!

Willard, the first and most solid movie, has Bruce Davison playing the titular young man, and boy is he put-upon. Ten minutes in and we already know Willard's life sucks. His sweaty and grizzled boss (Ernest Borgnine) only keeps him on because Willard's dad once owned the company. He's just itching for an excuse to fire him. Then we meet his freaky mum (Elsa Lanchester, no less) and her elderly friends – the only guests at Willard's birthday party. All they do is nag him about being a better man. He's so desperate for non-judgmental friends that it's no surprise when he starts hanging out with the house rats. And soon, these rodents will give him the confidence (and practical help) to finally



"You made me hate myself! But I like myself now!

rebel. "You made me hate myself!" Willard tells his boss. "But I like myself now!" Stephen King once called this most chilling line in the movie, and I think he's right.

It's a strange film by any standard – like an exploitation wolf lurking in big Hollywood clothes (it even has a big, lush Alex North score), and it's great fun to finally see it; especially when you realise how influential it was on the decade that followed. The massive wave of 'nature attacks' movies (*Jaws*, *Grizzly*, *Piranha* et al) and 'nerd revenge' movies (*Carrie*, *Evilspeak*, *Bad Ronald*) probably found their source here. *Willard* looks surprisingly good in HD, too.

The sequel, *Ben*, cranks up the rat attacks and brings in a lonely little boy with a bad heart. He's best friends with the chief-rat, Ben, and even writes a pretty song in his honour – having no idea that Ben and his chums are chewing people's eyes out across town. The sequel also employs a bizarre technique, which I've never seen before. When the carnage happens and the police turn up, we see crowds of people staring in *complete silence*. Honestly. It lasts for ages. Is the film saying that we humans are little better the horde of hungry feeders, or was it just some quirk to add to the running time? Whatever the reason, I liked it. In the end, *Willard* and *Ben* won't blow you away, but they're left-field enough to make an impact; not least because they help reclaim the dirty horror DNA of a karaoke classic.

Mother!

Dir Darren Aronofsky, US 2017
On UK release

Darren Aronofsky has described writing the script for *Mother!* (over a period of five frenzied days) as a fever dream, which is coincidentally also a rather apt description of what it feels like to watch his latest effort. The film tells a strange yet compelling story that is incredibly confrontational, not only in terms of its cinematography and imagery, but also in terms Pennywise, but rather which performance you prefer. It should also be noted that where Curry's Pennywise was the focal point of the miniseries, many other forms of 'It' get screentime in the new film, which means the audience doesn't get to explore Skarsgård's performance as thoroughly as that of Curry.

While the film boasts several great elements, it's far from faultless. Where the novel jumped back and forth between The Losers' Club as children and grown-ups, the film focuses solely on the children, perhaps leaving the adults' bout with the evil of Derry to be addressed in an as of yet unscheduled sequel. While the more linear format, focusing on a single era, eliminates the risk of tonal confusion and ensures a smooth progression of events, it also becomes part of the film's pacing issue. As the kids each get their terrifying encounter with one of It's many forms, these become almost a montage, doing less and less to move the narrative along.

Pacing issues aside, *It* manages to be a fun, engaging and heartfelt story about friendship, coming of age and facing your fears – and one of the best Stephen King adaptations thus far. While the horror occasionally relies on jump-cuts and hyperactive editing, it is mostly done well, with a few genuinely jaw-dropping sequences bringing to mind some of the most creative scares from *A Nightmare On Elm Street*. All in all, *It* very definitely floats, and the amount of heart and skill it showcases suggests that any sequels will likely float too.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★★★☆

of how it challenges the viewer. By dealing with themes such as privacy, idolatry and the pitfalls of interpersonal relationships, the viewer's own perceptions become part of the viewing experience, which makes watching the film a very subjective affair.

Mother! takes its time to build its mounting layers of surreal unease and mystery, at times raising the question of how much of what is happening is actually real and how much is potentially hallucinated by Jennifer Lawrence's character. Much as *Rosemary's Baby* unfolded from the point of view of Mia Farrow's character, *Mother!* unfolds from the perspective of Jennifer Lawrence's; we are constantly either following directly behind her or seeing her react to the increasingly frustrating behaviour of her husband and the mysterious guests that continue to arrive at their house. As a result, we know as little as she does, and the heavy use of close-ups and Steadicam pulls the audience completely into the film, forcing them to try and process any given event occurring on the screen.

The performances further drive home the odd mix of plausible reality and hellish nightmare, as the various characters slowly become exaggerated versions of various personality types that most of us have crossed paths with at some point. Michelle Pfeiffer makes an impressive return to the big screen as a particularly obnoxious character with a subtly menacing undertone, and while Pfeiffer and the rest of the cast do very well as a whole, the standout performance is undoubtedly that of Lawrence; she manages to convey the confusion and frustration of her character without losing any of the humanity necessary for the audience to invest in such an intense role, easily making this the best performance of her career thus far.

There is much to take away from *Mother!* and mull over once the end credits roll, as the film is brimming with allegory and symbolism. While some viewers will enjoy the abstract, absurdist two-hour ride, this will be a drawback for others, who may find the experience beyond tedious. It should also be noted that the film's weird and winding story requires you to remain in your seat for the entirety of its runtime, as even the briskest trip to the bathroom or concession stand leaves you at risk of missing a twist or turn, leaving you completely lost as to how everything managed to escalate this much beyond comprehension in just a few minutes.

Additionally, those who are expecting a horror film in the more traditional sense may also leave feeling dissatisfied. Love it or hate it, Aronofsky has undoubtedly created something quite special with *Mother!*, which merits multiple viewings to even begin to comprehend the full extent of its meanings and metaphors.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★★★☆

Kedi

Dir Ceyda Torun, Turkey 2016
Amazon Video from 23 October

Cat-lovers and Turkophiles (I'll admit to both) will probably get the most out of this charming, beautifully shot evocation of Istanbul and its street cats, but there's much here for forteans too: for one thing, it's fascinating to hear other cultures' takes on the great feline mysteries. Do cats really help people by absorbing and dissipating their bad human energies? Are cats aware of the existence of God, while dogs aren't? (The canine dimwits think we're deities, after all.) Are we here to care for cats in a fitting echo of divine love, or are they here to allow us the occasional glimpse of the eternal? The good citizens of Istanbul all have their own, often eccentric, opinions on such weighty questions, and many, too, have stories of saving and being saved by these proud and independent moggies – like the luckless fisherman whose life had hit rock bottom before a persistant puss led him to a wallet stuffed with cash; now he cares for all the feline waifs and strays that come his way. The cats, too, are a diverse and indiviualistic bunch, living a hard knock life on the margins of society.

Kedi is a touching, funny and often poetic portrait of a great city, its people, and, of course, its countless cats. It's also, in the end, a film about love in its many forms.

David Sutton

★★★★☆

DVD

THE LOCH

ITV Studios, £12.99 (DVD)

Teenagers lay out bones and guts on the shore of Loch Ness, as the spoof remains of the Monster. But amongst the animal offal is a human heart… The local piano teacher is found dead at the bottom of a cliff – and the autopsy reveals that part of his brain's been removed… And in the opening title sequence of *The Loch*, a body is seen weighted down by a curling stone below the waves…

A serial killer is at large in the fictional town of Lochnavoy. DCI Lauren Quigley (Siobhan Finneran, embittered lady's maid O'Brien in *Downton Abbey*) is brought in to head the enquiry, overriding local DCI Frank Smilie (John Sessions, in just about everything) and she brings with her psychological profiler Blake Albrighton (Don Gilet, *55 Degrees North*, *Eastenders*) whose smart theories and publicity-seeking approach alienate everyone.

At the heart of the series is DS Annie Redford (Laura Fraser, *Neverwhere*, *Florence Nightingale*, *Breaking Bad*). She knows everyone in the town; her husband Alan runs a monster-spotting tourist boat, and her daughter Evie is one of the three students creating the fake monster remains and causing her mother problems throughout the series; Quigley asks Annie, "What are you at this moment? A mother or a police officer?" before temporarily throwing her off the case. Annie is the local girl with local knowledge, doing most of the worthwhile work while the others are too busy sniping at each other.

Immediately suspect are two people who clearly have things to hide, Dr Simon Marr (John Heffernan, *Dickensian*, *Ripper Street*) and the creepy principal of the Sixth Form College, Craig Petrie (Alistair Mackenzie, Archie in *Monarch of the Glen*). But there are other possible suspects, including another tour operator, Leighton Thomas (William Ash, *Being Eileen*, *Great Night Out*), who it turns out is a reformed double murderer.

There are some great actors here, but they're let down by their characters. The suspects are all too obviously suspicious; the clashing personalities of the detectives are overplayed. The teenage students, who should be at the heart of the story but are oddly peripheral to it for most of the time, are particularly unconvincing – as much the fault of the direction as of the actors, who seem to be doing the best they can with the roles they've been given.

It begins as an intriguing story, and is enjoyable enough, but it becomes less so as it goes on. There are too many false trails, too many characters you are purposely led to dislike and suspect of being the killer. Both the body count and the red herrings increase as the series continues. The revelations in episode six are clever and convoluted but not really convincing. The whole thing tries far too hard. But full marks for the stunning scenery – the one thing not in the writers' and directors' control. "Beauty of nature, eh. Bores the living shit out of me," says Quigley in episode one; but it's the best part. **David V Barrett** ★★☆☆☆

PHOENIX FORGOTTEN

Signature Entertainment, £7.99 (DVD)

Yes, it's 2017 and they're *still* making found footage movies about young kids going missing under strange circumstances. Here, three teens vanish after the famous Phoenix Lights appear over Arizona, so one of their sisters sets out to make a documentary and find the truth. It's fairly slow, and the 'real-life' actors feel like they're acting, but by the film's end you'll get your dose of flashing lights and dusty winds. I guess if you've somehow never seen a found-footage film before, this could be pretty gripping, but for the rest of us, there's a serious sense of déjà vu about it all. **PL** ★★☆☆☆

SOUNDS PECULIAR

BRIAN J ROBB PRESENTS THE FORTEAN TIMES PODCAST COLUMN

As a medium, podcasts have been enjoying something of a boom over the past few years. The democratisation of quality media production through high-specification computer equipment has allowed a plethora of previously marginalised voices their own access to what were once quaintly called 'the airwaves'.

In the past, broadcasting (reaching a wide audience from a single source) was heavily regulated and controlled, mainly through frequency scarcity: only those authorised or licensed to have access to the airwaves were allowed to broadcast. In UK terms that, initially, meant the BBC, with commercial stations coming along in the 1960s.

In terms of radio, there have been amateurs since the invention of the medium, reaching a crescendo with the offshore 'pirate' pop stations of the 1960s that ultimately led to the BBC launching Radio 1. For the longest time, Radio 4 (or NPR in the US) has been the default home of quality 'spoken word' content, whether that was drama, current affairs, or documentary radio.

Now, anyone with a microphone and an iPad, laptop, or computer and the right software can produce a decent podcast and launch their work onto a waiting world. Not all of them are good, while many are far better than you might expect, sometimes surpassing the productions of 'legitimate' broadcasters like the BBC or NPR. When it comes to fortean topics, there are a host of podcasts out there, ranging from the polished and compelling to the amateurish and downright weird. SOUNDS PECULIAR is your insider guide to the best of the current podcasts dealing with fortean topics: all you have to do is sit back and listen...

Podcast: The Infinite Monkey Cage
www.theinfinitemonkeycage.com
Host: Professor Brian Cox, Robin Ince
Episode Count: 95
Format: Round table discussions of science with a trio of guests
Established: 2009
Frequency: Seasons of six-seven episodes, twice yearly
Topics: All aspects of science and the scientific method

The extended podcast (which began in 2013, although all back episodes are now available) of the BBC's irreverent radio science show The Infinite Monkey Cage usually includes about 10-15 minutes of additional material cut from the live recording to fit the 30-minute broadcast slot on Radio 4. This gives added value to the podcast over and above the slightly more disposable radio broadcast, with the added advantage that listeners can listen at their own convenience.

The Infinite Monkey Cage began almost a decade ago, in 2009, presented by the BBC's favourite scientist Professor Brian Cox (not the Scottish actor) and stand up comedian Robin Ince. The pair spark off each other effectively, with Ince as informed about science as Cox is inspired by comedy. Their relationship provides much of the ongoing humour. Over the years, a series of long-running jokes have built up, including Ince's Carl Sagan impersonation and his repeated mocking of Cox's hair.

A trio of relevant guests join the presenters on each show, often a pair of scientists who specialise in the topic at hand and a comedian to bring a lighter touch to the material. The show is recorded in front of a live studio audience at the Radio Theatre in the BBC's Broadcasting House in London, which brings a degree of spontaneity to what otherwise could have been a dry exploration of the given topic.

The mix of comedy and science makes the science accessible, with the guest comedians often put in the position of asking the obvious, difficult, or irreverent questions of the scientists, who are forced then to explain the topic under discussion at a level that listeners can easily latch on to. The show has won a variety of awards, including a Gold Award at the radio industry Sony Awards in 2011.

Across its 95 episodes *The Infinite Monkey Cage* has tackled the links between science and science fiction (#7, a 2010 episode which included Jonathan Ross and Alan Moore as guests); the possibility of the apocalypse (#9); the role of randomness in life (#11); becoming an astronaut (#15; #91); space tourism (#39); and the connection between scientific advancement and warfare (#52). Alan Moore has returned twice (to date) to discuss cosmology (#16), and accessing the 'doors of perception' through drug use (#44).

Fortean topics have included mysticism and rationality (#17); 'Science vs the Supernatural' (#18); 'Science Mavericks' (#26); 'Parallel Universes' (#29); 'Improbable Science' (#32); 'What is Death?' (#37); and 'Irrationality' (#55). There have been various special live episodes from science festivals across the UK, and in summer 2015 the show toured major cities in the US.

A frequent guest, no doubt familiar to FT readers, is Richard Wiseman, Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at the University of Hertfordshire. As well as appearing on the episodes on the supernatural and irrationality, he featured on the 2012 Christmas Special, as well as taking part in episodes on deception (#57) and the science of sleep (#79). This year he appeared on an episode (#85) titled 'How to Beat the House and Win at Games'.

Other guests have included comedians Ben Miller (who studied for a PhD in physics), Chris Addison, Mark Steel, Alexei Sayle, Stephen Fry, Sara Pascoe, and Jon Culshaw. Scientists who have brought the information to supplement the entertainment have included such well-known names as Seth Shostak, Professor Steve Jones, Simon Singh, Dr Kevin Fong, and Professor Richard Dawkins. Episodes in the most recent series of particular fortean interest include 'What Particles remain to be discovered?' (#90), 'Will insects inherit the Earth?' (#93), and 'Are we living in a simulation?' (#94).

Strengths: The relationship between Cox and Ince is the heart of the show; they have an easy-going, occasionally snarky relationship that offers a doorway to the science.

Weaknesses: Sometimes the science element is not done justice as the focus is on the 'funny'; it's rare, but it has happened.

Recommended Episodes: #2 Extraterrestial Life (with Jon Ronson); #11 Randomness (with Tim Minchin); #29 Parallel Universes (with Professor Sir Martin Rees); #31 Space Exploration (with Sir Patrick Stewart); #60 When Quantum Goes Woo (with Ben Goldacre); #81 200 Years of Frankenstein (with Sir Christopher Frayling).

Verdict: A rare successful mix of entertainment and solid science discussion.

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Conspiracy comfort

I wonder what the net result of higher paranoia [**FT357:52-53**] is for the paranoiac. At times I see that the existence of a supposed conspiracy is all that is required for emotional fulfilment. All the 'facts' and outrage are not actually intended to initiate corrective action such as removal of the reptilians from power. The 'contrailists' get great satisfaction from the idea that some sort of mass gassing is taking place every day (what exactly the evil gas is supposed to do or why it somehow doesn't effect the contrailist is apparently beside the point). However, they never seem really to care about uncovering the physical mechanisms needed to achieve this ongoing operation. Perhaps actual investigation, as opposed to armchair cherry-picking of facts, isn't conductive to the continued mental thrill of the conspiracy.

This is not to ignore actual movements that have caused immense harm and violence through fantasy dogma.

William Hohauser
By email

Two critics

I never thought FT would become a witless, trite, dishonest and unfair left-wing propaganda machine. But, that is what you two [David Sutton and Paul Sieveking] have turned it into. The latest Fortean Library article ['Help! Help! The paranoids are after me' by the Hierophant's Apprentice, **FT357:52-53**] was unforgivably one-sided and flat out wrong. Please inform the author that he is not worthy to suck the s**t out of Joseph McCarthy's ass. You can continue to enjoy your fagtard circle jerk but, after 25 years, I'm gone. F**k you!

John Guerrasio
By email

In a review of *A Cabinet of Ancient Medical Curiosities* [**FT357:62**] Barry Baldwin says the book "pullulates with transgenders without any prattling about their 'rights'" (rights in inverted commas). But actually that's just rights, without the speech marks. And that viewpoint contributes to why so many trans people die every year.

SIMULACRA CORNER

Terrifying tree

Robson Bolam from Telford in Shropshire sent us this photograph of a scary tree from Stowlangtoft in Suffolk.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 2409, London NW5 4NP or to sieveking@forteantimes.com.

I've read every issue of FT, and in recent months, I've seen several offhand (and completely irrelevant) comments like this sneaking in, from several contributors, such as an out-of-the-blue rant about the impossibility of the discipline of feminist glaciology (you'll keep an open mind about bigfoot, but not about that), in a UFO column of all places [**FT355:28**], to that borderline fascistic forum piece about rodent eugenics, which was utter nonsense presented as if from a position of authority [**FT356:56-57**, duly criticised in **FT358:75-77**].

All in all, it's like watching a friend succumb to the fears and hatreds that can arise from old age. I love FT, and I feel that if I don't speak up, these contributors might feel their audience agrees with them, and be emboldened to go further.

Paul Cornell
By email

Local hermit

You state that Denisova Cave in Siberia is named after the Denisovan people [**FT357:14**]. However, it's the other way around: the people are named after the cave, which is itself named after local hermit St Denis, who inhabited it in the 18th century. Otherwise a brilliant article (first I'd heard of the bracelet). Thank you for continuing to produce by far and away the best magazine in the English language.

Nicholas Southwell
Penzance, Cornwall

Jet trade

The trade in Whitby jet [**FT357:40**] predates the Victorian era by at least 3,000 years. At the side of our house at the mouth of the Angus Glens are the remains of a tumulus. When this was excavated in 1919, amongst other items, there were found 98 barrel-shaped jet beads and spacer plates that are thought to have comprised a necklace and bracelet. X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy showed that these beads were of Whitby jet. The interesting question is what did the inhabitants of this area have to trade for what must have been a very expensive product when it arrived in Angus? One suggestion made to me is that it could have been fresh-water pearls, which are still found in the area.

One final point: whilst Whitby is perhaps the best known area related to Bram Stoker, we shouldn't forget that the east coast of Scotland also has its claims; specifically that the model for Castle Dracula was Slains at Cruden Bay. Supporters of Slains Castle claim early drafts of the novel had Dracula landing at Cruden Bay, and have accused Whitby of luring vampire fans under false pretences.

Philip Bolt
Redhall, Tayside

Give Peas a chance

I thought you might like this apparent example of a false memory. I wonder if it widely afflicts others and thus categorised with the 'Mandela Effect'.

My partner and I were travelling north on the M25 and passed under the bridge with the graffiti "GIVE PEAS A CHANCE". We spoke of it fondly: "Ah, that's been there for years and years, hasn't it?" I claimed to remember it from about 2000 when I was making the journey more regularly. How long had it actually been there, we wondered. I discounted any connection with the John Lennon song, and concluded the 1980s, perhaps.

Some Googling later, we turned up some photos showing PEAS only, but cars travelling past with number plates as modern as 2008. A 2009 post on a forum discusses the recent addition of the other

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words, so (barring considerable conspiracy) there's every reason to believe it's our memories at fault, and the sign is less than 10 years old. I'd have put a lot of money on it being much older.

I mentioned the bridge to my colleague at work who also uses the road infrequently (though more regularly than I do), and unprompted he immediately blurted out the same impression: "That's been there for decades!" He also smiled at recalling it. I wonder if the fondness for this silly landmark has something to do with its effect. I also wonder whether commuters who've seen it every day would have a more accurate impression of when it appeared.

Rhiannon Davies
Bradford on Avon, Wiltshire

Editor's note: The Edwardian bridge in question is between junctions 16 and 17 of the M25, near Uxbridge. "Peas" was reportedly the name of a London graffiti artist. The words "give" and "a chance" were added later, with the amended graffiti thought to refer to his frequent arrests, according to an historic building report by Oxford Archaeology. The "Peas" tag can be seen in several places, particularly on other bridges. The bridge has its own Facebook page with about 6,500 followers. [BBC News, 20 Aug 2017.]

The Haunted Generation

I have really enjoyed the recent stuff FT has run on hauntology [**FT357:74-76**], having been very much of that generation (born 1960) and being very fond of music from Ghost Box et al. I am sure my early experience of the unsettling side of late 1960s/early 1970s youth culture was important to my subsequent appreciation of forteana.

I was surprised, however, that neither the article on hauntology nor the subsequent correspondence picked up on two things that seemed to me to be central to my experience as a member of the 'Haunted Generation'; firstly, school country dancing. At primary school we used to have country dancing lessons, something that had been introduced to schools in the 1950s, or possibly earlier, by Cecil Sharp and associates, and which saw my classmates and I careering round the school hall doing reels, jigs and strathspeys to scratchy Percy Grainger records played over a large speaker while the teacher called the steps. It was all rather Wicker Man. I seem to remember this continued until it was replaced by the differently peculiar Music and Movement, which has already been mentioned in a Hauntological context.

The second thing was a series of poetry books called *Voices*, aimed at upper primary and lower secondary children. These were extraordinary volumes, and I still own copies today. In them you could find Sylvia Plath, WB Yeats, Carl Sandburg, William Blake and John Clare all together next to traditional folksongs, poems written by children, limericks, the text of a mummers play and translations from Japanese, Chinese and Sanskrit verse. These were accompanied by reproductions of Bosch engravings, Hiroshoge prints, grim street photography – the cover of one volume featured a photo of a shattered fire escape silhouetted against the sky, another a skull, a candle and a moth – New Guinea tribesmen in bizarre masks, Elizabeth Frink sculpture, Archimboldo, Tenniel, even a corpse-scattered First World War battlefield. One volume has its pages numbered using sheep counting numbers – een, teen, tuther, futher, fip… The book design is classic 1960s education moderne, as so effectively spoofed by Ghostbox, Scarfolk etc, and the feel so perfectly hauntological that the term could have been invented for them.

PETER KING

Ian Simmons
Monkseaton, Tyne and Wear

I was very interested by the letters about 'The Haunted Generation' [**FT354:30-37**]. I was born in 1958, but can still relate to the era from a slightly older perspective – Pan horror story anthologies, late night movies on BBC2 etc. – the Mark Gatiss generation, if you will. (Remember Black Aquarius?) And I think it's largely because everyone over 30 in 1970 had first- or second-hand knowledge of the period 1914-45, one of the most traumatic in world history, and this suppressed trauma leaked, oozed, and dripped into popular culture, whilst at the same time the grown-ups tried to tell the under-20s that everything was exactly as it should be. This disjunction between what we sensed and what we were taught was largely what gave the era its strange atmosphere...

Janet Wilson
By email

In reference to Albert Ravey's letter [**FT357:74**], responding to 'The Haunted Generation' ("We have gone from being an island of mystery and weirdness to being a prosaic, materialistic place…"): never was a truer statement made! The grim forces of self-conformity are sadly in the ascendant, and more insidious than ever. However, maybe a solution does exist. A number of naturalists are nowadays committed to the re-wilding of the British landscape; perhaps as forteans we should be working toward a 're-weirding' of our island? Judging by your pages, this is a process already underway, but there's a lot of work to be done.

Arthur Burton
By email

Jacques Vallee

In her discussion of the contribution that Dr J Allen Hynek (1910-1986) made to ufology, Jenny Randles [**FT357:25**] refers to the French-American scientist Dr Jacques Vallee. She states that, unlike the late Hynek, Vallee isn't a "hard science man". That's a slightly odd assertion, because Vallee has degrees in maths, astrophysics and computer science, and he worked as a computer scientist.

Randles goes on to state that Vallee became the architect of a new, psychosocial ufology, whose flagship journal was the UK-published *Magonia*. Now, the latter may have borrowed its name from one of Vallee's books, *Passport to Magonia* (1969), but the 'psychosocial hypothesis' (PSH) that *Magonia* espoused – and is still promoted, via its online continuation http://pelicanist.blogspot.co.uk/ – hardly reflects the published views of Jacques Vallee.

Advocates of the PSH favour prosaic explanations of anomalous experiences, construing them in terms such as misperception, misinterpretation, fantasy-proneness, and hoaxing. Vallee, on the other hand, contends that many UFO incidents have been genuinely enigmatic. In his book *Dimensions: A Casebook of Alien Contact* (Souvenir Press, 1988, pp288-289) he states that his belief is that "the UFO phenomenon is one of the ways through which an alien form of intelligence of incredible complexity is communicating with us *symbolically*" (Vallee's emphasis). However, he doesn't think that this intelligence is extraterrestrial.

(Incidentally, Vallee's books published in the USA drop the acute accent from his surname.)

Peter A McCue
By email

Mártenitsa

To answer Daniel Holmes's question [**FT356:73**], his strange tree dolls appear to be a *mártenitsa* (plural *mártenitsi*). About 35 years ago I worked in Bulgaria as an English teacher in a state school. On 1 March a colleague

gave me a pair of small red and white woollen balls joined with a long red thread that she tied around my wrist, explaining that it was a traditional gift to celebrate the coming of spring. Over the next few days I barely saw anyone who was not wearing red and white tassels, balls, or little dolls identical to the ones in the photo. The dolls are called Pizho and Penda. By the end of the week they started to appear hanging on trees, and my colleague told me that they were left there as nesting material for the storks that had just begun to arrive. I don't know if they were ever used as such, but the storks never got mine as I selfishly kept them as a souvenir. I seem to remember a greeting on 1 March that related to Baba Marta, but I can't recall the exact phrase.

Andy Salter
Bangor, Gwynedd

Mártenitsi are worn until the first sign of spring, such as a fruit tree in blossom, whereupon they are taken off the wrist/neck or unpinned from clothing and tied to the tree. Other signs of spring include seeing the first stork or swallow, when the *mártenitsi* are removed and put under a stone. You can predict the future based on which insect is nearest your *mártenitsa* under the stone the next day! Although we have no Bulgarian heritage, I really love the whole tradition and give my kids *mártenitsi* on 1 March every year, but we must have Bulgarian neighbours because some years we find other *mártenitsi* hanging from the plum trees down our road.

Heather Robbins
Bognor Regis, West Sussex

Regarding little dolls hanging from tree branches: several years ago, in the town of New Brighton on the Wirral, I saw something similar while on my way to work. it was quite high up, but I could make out that it was a small stuffed figure of Peter Griffin from *Family Guy.* It had gone after a few days, possibly blown away by the wind, and nothing else replaced it.

Darren Rosenberg
Birkenhead, Merseyside

Chalk outlines

In response to the Mythchasers question regarding whether police ever used chalk outlines [**FT357:21**], I can confirm that at least here in New York City the police did use chalk at least up to the 1990s. I witnessed these outlines on two occasions. Once in the 1980s while riding on a bicycle, I turned a corner and rode straight over an outline of a person and through their blood puddled next to the head outline. An angry officer ran up to me but quickly realised that nobody had bothered to barricade the scene of a pedestrian/car accident to prevent something like this from happening. The still alive victim was taken away from the busy street by ambulance and the outline was for the forensic team who had yet to arrive. One can assume that the advent of phone cameras has negated the need to make these outlines.

William Hohauser
By email

Giant hopper

It is my humble submission that *Tyrannosaurus rex* once hopped in the manner of kangaroos.

Anthony Riddell
Richmond, Victoria, Australia

Superhero hijinks

I enjoyed the Hierophant's Apprentice's 'Building A Fortean Library' about urban legends [**FT353:52-53**], particularly as it was Jan Harold Brunvand's *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* that ultimately led me to be chasing road ghosts across west Lancashire [**FT328:32-39**].

Around 2013 I picked up a copy of Brunvand's *Too Good To Be True* in a charity shop, and settled down to reading new urban legends, in addition to those I was already familiar with. Eventually I came to the Superhero Hijinks story in Chapter 5 (Sexcapades), which has a woman tied up on the bed with her unconscious husband naked on the floor wearing a Superman cape. Jan states in the associated notes that the earliest published text he had found was 1986.

I was rather flabbergasted by the year, because I had heard a very similar story around 1969; definitely between 1968 and 1971. I readily recall my friend Trevor telling a story – as a true story – when a group of us were all sitting around the table in our local pub in my home town of Wolverhampton. This means that I was either in the Sixth Form or in my early years at University. The version he told was along the following lines: A woman heard a continual knocking on her bedroom wall from the neighbouring house. She went next door to see if anyone was in, and called for the neighbours, but the house was locked and she could not get in. The knocking continued and so she called a policeman, who also heard the knocking, and the two of them went to check the neighbours' house again. The policeman forced entry into the house and the two of them went up to the adjoining bedroom, where they found the wife naked, spread-eagled and tied to the bedposts. She was also gagged. Despite being tied, she could knock the wall with her knuckles – which is what had been heard. At the foot of the bed was her unconscious husband dressed in a Spiderman outfit! When they untied the woman, she explained that she and her husband enjoyed undertaking such sexcapades, and her husband had climbed on to the top of the wardrobe/ chest of drawers, situated opposite the foot of the bed, in order to leap off on to her. Unfortunately his foot had slipped and he had fallen and hit his head on the bedpost, knocking himself out, etc etc.

Now Trevor assured us that the policeman was a friend of his, and he had got the story from him directly and recently. The location was said to be somewhere in or near the neighbouring town of Walsall. I definitely recall that Trevor told it as something factual; he did not tell the story as a joke, or as "a story" – even though he was arguably the very best joke teller I have had the good fortune to come across. Naturally I, along with my friends present, re-told this story on many occasions when at university, and consequently it will no doubt have disseminated nationwide. Technically, I heard the story as involving a friend-of-a-friend and so it is by definition a FOAF tale – but I genuinely believed that I was only one step removed from the source. Whether or not this was the case, what is clear is that it is essentially the same story as that quoted by Jan, and that it is much older than he had determined.

It is easy to see how Trevor's story would have evolved bit by bit over time and over the pond, with (for example) Spiderman being superseded by Superman. But what I found myself thinking was that somehow I could have been virtually at the source of this urban legend, and that it could well have been the re-telling of the initial story by Trevor, me and our friends, that had given it momentum. Stranger things have happened.

I contacted Jan with the above and he very much welcomed the additional information. He is now retired and spends a lot of his time fishing and skiing in his home state of Utah. Nevertheless he has always been helpful in responding to questions that I have asked in relation to my phantom hitchhiker-related researches. With David Sutton's support, I informally approached Jan about whether he might consider writing an article about the relationship between urban legends and fake news for the FT issue [**FT352**] that focused on fake news.

Jan politely declined, making the point that urban legends as an oral traditional genre, while very common from the 1960s through to the 1980s, later mostly migrated into popular culture. He contends that this is largely due to the Internet, with these types of stories now being circulated via websites and forums, what might be called "cyberlore". He kindly provided me with a copy of his paper: "The Vanishing 'Urban Legend'", which was published in *Midwestern Folklore* (vol.30: no.2, Fall 2004, pp.5-20). It is a very worthwhile read for all forteans with an interest in this topic, which I wholly recommend.

Rob Gandy
Wirral, Merseyside

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Party poopers?

The reviewer of *A Traveler's Guide to the Afterlife* [**FT356:63**] disclosed more about themselves than the book they were reviewing when they wrote, "Party-poopers like nihilists and materialists will find little to enjoy here, especially as they bring so little of value to this otherwise rich feast of mankind's belief systems."

On the contrary, a materialist outlook is no impediment to being entertained by the superstitions indulged in by others regarding "what lies beyond". As for bringing little of value to the feast, the materialist can arrive with some much-needed light and reason and, unlike some of those afflicted by religion, they can be relied on to bring a bottle of something alcoholic to help celebrate the only life that we have. Not such party-poopers after all.

Martin Stubbs
London

Icy hazards

I found Theo Paijman's article on the disappearance of Gertrude Strassburger [**FT354:28-29**] quite interesting, but puzzling. I grew up in Timmins, Ontario, where winters are extremely cold. I still live in Northern Ontario but about 350km (220 miles) south of Timmins. Winters are a little less extreme and, as I love winter, I spend a lot of time outdoors ice fishing, skiing and skating on lakes and rivers, snowmobiling, etc. I've never seen a foot of ice on a shallow lake let alone a moving river by 2 December where I now live in Sudbury, Ontario – ice is usually 2-3ft (60-90cm) thick by mid-March, but open areas can still exist. Now, northern Minnesota may have earlier and harsher winters so that much ice may not be impossible by 2 December. River ice can vary in thickness because of current and pressure cracks. When reading the story one gets the impression that the ice that was being skated on was clear of snow but that is rarely the case unless an area has been cleared for a rink. Often the ice has a layer of snow sometimes only a few inches thick that allows one to skate but can hide the ice and its condition – a thin patch for example. I have gone through the ice here when skating because I did not see a thin patch covered by snow that can be found where there is current or by beaver houses where the beavers leave branches in the water to create a thin spot during the winter. Or under bridges where it tends to be warmer.

I also lived in Sweden for a number of years where I had the rare opportunity to skate to work over frozen sea ice. On one occasion my leg fell through a long pressure crack in the ice that was about a foot wide, again hidden by a layer of paper-thin ice and snow. I scrambled up immediately as any shift in the ice could have pinned me. Low temperature and blowing snow can cover up an open area quite quickly. From the story it seems the young people were skating when it was dark as "none of her party skated outside the circle of electric light". I do not know how good electric lighting was in 1902, but I can tell you even during a bright sunny day while out ice fishing I've seen wolves out on the lake about a quarter mile away that took a while for my friends and I to tell what they were. On a dark night, even with lighting, a person can get lost in the shadows (for instance under a bridge) at a distance. As for there being only two sets of footprints, I know that if I am wearing short boots or shoes in the winter I will walk in tracks that are already made to avoid stepping in fresh deep snow and getting snow in said boots or shoes. There must have been some point where there were many tracks from the skaters walking before changing into their skates, most likely near the spot Gertrude sat by the fire. I can say that after a day of ice fishing with one or two friends the snow looks as if it's had a soccer match played on it.

So, what is my point? That a young girl sitting under a bridge on or near the ice by a fire on a dark evening waiting for her friends a quarter mile away may have retraced her tracks back out onto the ice to watch for them or to relieve herself in a more private area, fallen through a covered patch of thin ice not easily seen and been swept away by a current that even if weak would be deadly. In the dark the open patch where she fell through might not be readily seen by the returning friends. During their initial consternation and subsequent search, depending on the cold, the spot might have frozen over and been covered by blowing snow. It might have frozen to the point that later searchers could tread on the very spot where the poor girl went through. The ice might have been a foot thick in most places but probably not throughout.

Now, the part I find puzzling. I am sure the good people of Crookston would be more than familiar with everything I've said as they lived in and were experienced in such a winter climate. Why were they so sure she did not go through the ice and instead mysteriously disappeared?

Ken Jarecki
Sudbury, Ontario, Canada

Elusive five per cent

The search for some meaningful phenomena in the five per cent of unexplained UFO observations/encounters seems on the face of it an admirable idea [**FT352:27**], but I think a note of caution is called for. Let's propose a hypothesis: UFO observations are all down to a group of known causes, basically misperceptions of natural objects and phenomena, hoaxes and frauds. On looking at the available data we find that our hypothesis has a 95% explanatory power. That might not impress a physicist looking for a 99.99% or even higher explanatory power for their hypothesis, but we are not dealing with a hard science here. Rather we have a massive experiment in human biology/psychology, so a 95% explanatory rate for the hypothesis is pretty good. The remaining five per cent could be regarded as noise. To look at it slightly differently at what level of explanation do we give up and accept that that's all there is? I suspect that even if we could explain 99.99% of UFO observations some would still see the resolution of the 'mystery' as lying in the unexplained 0.01%.

Ron Gardner
Ludlow, Shropshire

Premature babies

Edward Dutton finds an "astonishing number" of famous people who were born prematurely [**FT353:56-57**]. There are indeed plenty of such lists; they are, however, not reliable. The case of Newton, described in the article, is well documented. Many others mentioned are far less so, to the degree that they appear to be unknown outside the lists. These are possibly compiled not for historical or medicinal reasons, but by people who find comfort in them. A couple of names I investigated were more interesting, though.

Johannes Kepler was born on 27 December 1571, a small and sickly baby. In those days it was dangerous enough to be a newborn at all, never mind born two months early. But how do we know he was born early? Many years later he calculated the time of his conception with impressive precision: 4:37am on 17 May. This happened to be seven months before his birth; and two days after his parents' marriage.

Winston Churchill was announced thus in the *Times*: "On the 30th Nov., at Blenheim Palace, the Lady Randolph Churchill, prematurely, of a son". Again, according to Dutton's article, this was supposedly two months premature. If little Winston was anything but a perfectly healthy baby it's not mentioned in any source. Also, by a strange coincidence, his parents had married about seven months before his birth.

Perhaps some other supposed "preemies" were subject to similar coincidences.

Peter Olausson
Gothenburg, Sweden

Dutton suggests (following an interpretation of Shakespeare) that Richard III was born prematurely. In fact, the commonest accusation was that Richard had spent 24 months in his mother's womb, making him the opposite of premature (whatever that is).

Martin Jenkins
London

IT HAPPENED TO ME...

First-hand accounts from *FT* readers and browsers of www.forteantimes.com

Now you see it…

In the winter of 1985 I was employed as a greenkeeper at a council-run bowling green in New Brighton, Wirral. One day the weather was quite bad and, unable to work, I retired to my small messroom for an early teabreak. While there I picked up my usual daily newspaper and found an article about the great American mariner Joshua Slocum and his lone voyage around the world in his boat *Spray* in 1895-1898. I was fascinated by the story and decided I would search for his book *Sailing Alone Around The World* in local bookshops or libraries when I had the chance. The rain by now had stopped so I stood up to go back to work and accidently dropped my newspaper on to the floor. As I bent down to pick it up I noticed something on the floor wedged behind the armchair I had just vacated. I saw that it was a book and pulled it out. As I did so I had a very strange feeling that I already knew what the book would be. It was the very book I had just read about. I was amazed as there were no other books in the room and I was the only person who'd spent any time in there for over a year. The newspaper was new that day so I discounted the idea that someone else had read the article at an earlier date, bought the book themselves and had left it there.

Over the next few days I read the book and found it to be very interesting. When I'd finished I decided to give it to my Dad to read as we shared the same love of all things maritime. On arriving at the house I found my parents were not in so I left the book on the kitchen table and went home. A few days later I remembered the book and rang Dad to ask what he'd thought of it. To my surprise he replied that he didn't know what I was talking about as he'd never seen the book, and that it was nowhere to be found. He checked with Mum who said she hadn't seen it and had certainly not moved it or thrown it away by accident. My brothers confirmed that they had not visited my parents that week and hadn't seen it either. The book had simply vanished. I can only think it returned to where it mysteriously came from and hopefully has reappeared for somebody else to read. Interestingly, in the book, Joshua Slocum recounts how he was visited by a ghostly spectre of a sailor who piloted his boat during a storm whilst he lay ill on deck (see **FT354:49**). Slocum and his ship later vanished without trace in the area known as the Bermuda Triangle in the Atlantic.

Tony Davenport
Birkenhead Wirral, Merseyside

A tear in reality

It was just after 7pm on 9 January 2016 when I saw what I can only describe as a solid black tear in reality. It was there for just a fraction of a second, and was on the bridge over the river Glaze in Greater Manchester. All the streetlights were on and casting light all around. What struck me about the strange dark object was that it stood out from the bush in the background as solid black! It showed no reflection of light from the streetlights, and looked as if it was just floating there.

I created a reconstruction of what I saw (shown above), using a photo taken on the bridge over the Glaze at the location. The river is about 20ft (6m) below the bridge, and the bridge marks the boundary between Salford and Warrington. Of course, the photo was taken in daylight, but the event was at night, when the tear appeared to be even more solid black than in the picture – it was the absence of any light or shadow that made the dark tear so special.

Jim D
Warrington, Cheshire

Frozen moment

In August 1977 I was a 13-year-old boy on holiday with my parents at a cottage in Trevine, Pembrokeshire. I was out in the back garden one morning, while my mother was in the cottage cooking. I then had a rather strange experience: it was as if I were in a film and someone pressed 'pause'. Everything stopped. The wind didn't blow, the trees didn't move or rustle, the birds didn't sing or bees buzz – total silence. But I could still hear myself move. I walked to a hedge and looked out over the field beyond. Everything was utterly still and silent, no gulls, no tractors moving, nothing. This lasted about 30 seconds, then suddenly everything came back as normal. From behind me I heard my mother ask, "What are you up to?". I turned and saw her coming out of the outside toilet behind me. She couldn't have got there without us seeing each other. I said, "Did you see me when you went past?" She laughed and said, "No, were you hiding in that tree?" and walked inside. I seem to have briefly disappeared, or at least become invisible.

A couple of years later I realised that just a few miles away at that time the "Uninvited" St Brides Bay / Dale Farm UFO scare was happening, I saw nothing, and don't remember anything else, but I sometimes wonder where I went that day.

Chris Warr
Coombswood, West Midlands

Shropshire 'fairy'

I have seen a creature that looked just like the one described by Jim D [**FT355:76**]. On a sunny afternoon in 2011 I was on the phone to a friend, looking out the window towards the bottom of my garden. At the time I lived on a smallholding in an isolated part of Shropshire (a neighbouring county to where Jim D saw his 'fairy'). Suddenly a creature flew from my right past me and hovered over yellow roses in my garden. It flew as Jim D described: "with the body hanging down and the wings out at the back". It was unlike any creature I had ever seen before, or since. It was around the size of my palm and I remember thinking its face slightly resembled a hippo. I was so surprised I said to my friend, "I can see a fairy!" Ever since I have scoured insect books trying to identify it, without success. I like to think in this case there really was a fairy at the bottom of my garden!

Rachel McDonald

112. Northern Souling

ROB GANDY heads to a local hostelry for the seasonal weirdness of the Warburton Souling Play, an old Cheshire tradition enjoying a new lease of life...

I first became aware of the Warburton Souling Plays through Laurence Armstrong's presentation at Weird Weekend North 2016 [**FT343:20-21**]. They are a Cheshire tradition, performed in early November and closely related to the Christmastime Mumming Plays. They are about death and revival, the end of one year and the bringing of good luck for the next. Before the days of science and meteorology, rural people believed performing such plays was crucial to ensuring a good harvest the next year.

Distinctively, Souling plays include a Horse character, represented by a decorated horse's skull, which should not to be confused with the Hobby Horse of other English traditions. Historically, all characters are played by men. The Warburton plays are performed by a group known as "The Gang", its focal point being the local Saracen's Head pub.

The Souling Play is performed in up to six pubs in an evening, at roughly half-hour intervals, always starting on All Saints Day, 1 November, unless this falls on a Sunday. The pubs can be quite far apart, meaning that certain Gang members cannot imbibe because they are driving. Each evening targets different parts of east Cheshire: Warburton and its immediate environs, Lymm, Knutsford, and Urmston/Flixton. There were six pub tours in 2016, with the final one having the Gang meet at the Saracen's Head at lunchtime, perform at St Werburgh's Church Autumn Fair in the afternoon, and then visit another six pubs before finishing with a performance at the Saracen's Head.

My wife and I headed for the Saddlers Arms in Lymm on 4 November, and managed to get prime seats. The Gang proclaimed its arrival with one of its hearty songs outside the entrance. The Enterer strode into the pub, announcing the start of the Play and inviting King George to step forward and tell of his achievements winning gold and fighting dragons. George quickly realised there was a Jack Russell spaniel prepared to take him on. He was followed and challenged by the red-faced Turkish Champion, who delighted in highlighting that the Turkish team Fenerbahçe had beaten the local team, Manchester United, 2-1 in the Europa League the previous night. The ensuing sword fight led to the untimely death of the Turkish Champion, at which point the Champion's mother (The Old Woman), who bore a striking resemblance to Mrs Brown, rushed in to tell off King George. The situation was critical, so she called out to see if there was a doctor in the house. Luckily, the next person through the door was a Doctor who said that he could cure the slain Champion. This involved an anæsthetising mallet to the head and a large spanner applied to certain parts of the anatomy, followed by a liquid of indeterminate nature being poured down the Champion's throat via a funnel and tube. Miraculously, the Champion was resurrected and proclaimed the arrival of Beelzebub, who charged in noisily banging his dripping pan with his club. He announced that he would "drink the barrel dry, sir", and promptly downed a customer's pint in one. He in turn welcomed the arrival of Dick the Horse and his Driver, who stated that "He once was alive, but now he's dead. He is nothing but a horse's head" who has "But one leg; and for his living he's obliged to beg". This led into the final song encouraging people to "put your hand in your pocket and pull out your purse". Gang members then collected donations for the local Children's Adventure Farm Trust.[1] It was all great fun and well received.

Souling Plays are but one form of the traditional plays which were performed in their thousands throughout England until the end of the 19th century. The words spoken are, in essence, several hundred years old. Plays were likely performed by poorer community members; they end with what is, in effect, a begging song requesting food and commodities to help them through the winter. Sometimes cakes would be sold to raise money, leading such plays to be

ROB GANDY

ABOVE: A poster used to advertise the Warburton Souling Play. **LEFT:** Dick the Horse and his driver enter the pub.

ROB GANDY

ABOVE: The Gang assembled (left-right):The Turkish Champion, Beelzebub, King George, Dick the Horse and his Driver, the Doctor, the Enterer and the Old Woman.

called Soul-Caking. Reportedly this was the case with the Warburton Play. Unfortunately, the early 20th century saw many such plays lost to changing times and the impact of two world wars. The Warburton Play was one victim, being last performed in 1936 (or 1938 according to some sources). Fortunately, its details were written down and subsequently published.

Bollin Morris, because of their affinity with local traditions, revived the Souling Play in 1978.[2] Over time, the play evolved away from pure Morris activity, until by the beginning of the 21st century it was a completely separate entity. Since 2002, it has been performed annually at St Werburgh's Church's Autumn Fair.

The Gang stick to a traditional script, but ad lib to provide topicality and humour. However, the inclusion of the Horse is not fully understood; theories range from it representing a source of power for many life tasks in times past to an echo of Cheshire hunting traditions. Interestingly, some similar plays reference the horse's head being buried in the pub grounds, retrieved prior to the start of each season, cleaned and decorated, and then buried again following the final performance. It is believed

Historically, all characters are played by men

that one reason to bury the head was to prevent it being stolen, because having another gang's horse's head gave you "rights" to perform on their patch. The tradition of the Warburton Play starting and finishing at the Saracen's Head links to a note that the old Horse's head was buried there following the last performance in 1936; perhaps it is still there…

The current Horse's head is a real 25-year-old horse's skull acquired from a vet who had to put a horse down. It was buried for two years to clear off the flesh and then painted and mounted; but it is now kept in good condition by the "kit monitor" rather than being buried. Previously, the Gang had erroneously boiled a skull to strip off the flesh, but this made the bone soft and pieces kept breaking off, meaning it needed replacement after 10 years. The current skull has suffered a bit over the years, so the Gang has had some initial thoughts about its possible successor.

In 2002, a decision was made for Gang members to concentrate on one character each, thereby enabling more consistent performances with better interaction between the different characters. The previous approach was more ad hoc, with members playing multiple characters over a season and roles allocated on the night. In recent years the Gang has become more relaxed about the "one person-one character" approach, particularly as the best way of playing each part is well-established. Now, each member can perform two or three parts, adding flexibility to cover absences, as long as their physique is consistent with those parts' requirements – Beelzebub must be able to drink lots of beer.

At present, there are 12 Gang members in total, covering the seven parts (plus one under the Horse). Each does three-four nights and covers a maximum of two parts, one main and one back-up. Laurence has been involved since 1978, with the bulk of the older members participating for over 30 years. There are two pairs of fathers and sons, and two "new recruits" joined in 2015. The youngest are in their early 30s, but there are several bus pass holders. A couple admit to being *FT* readers.

To get around the Cheshire countryside, the Gang share cars and driving responsibilities. However, the final tour involves up to 12 hours drinking and so a minibus is hired. Beelzebub is the one character who never drives because he is forced (!) to down a pint in every pub as part of the Play.

It's wonderful that the Gang continues this revived Cheshire tradition and uses it to benefit good causes: this year, £1,450 was raised for charity. But if they want to replace their current Horse's head with that buried in 1936, perhaps they should look to the search for Richard III, who was found under a car park bay marked "R" (see **FT299:4-5**). Perhaps they should check to see if there's a bay marked "H" in the Saracen's Head car park…

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My great thanks to Laurence Armstrong for his help and guidance. All information is from Laurence and/or http://www.larchfieldhouse.co.uk/Souling/WarburtonSoulingPlay.htm, unless otherwise referenced.

NOTES

1 http://www.caft.co.uk/
2 http://bollinmorris.noip.me/

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WHY *FORTEAN*?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox.

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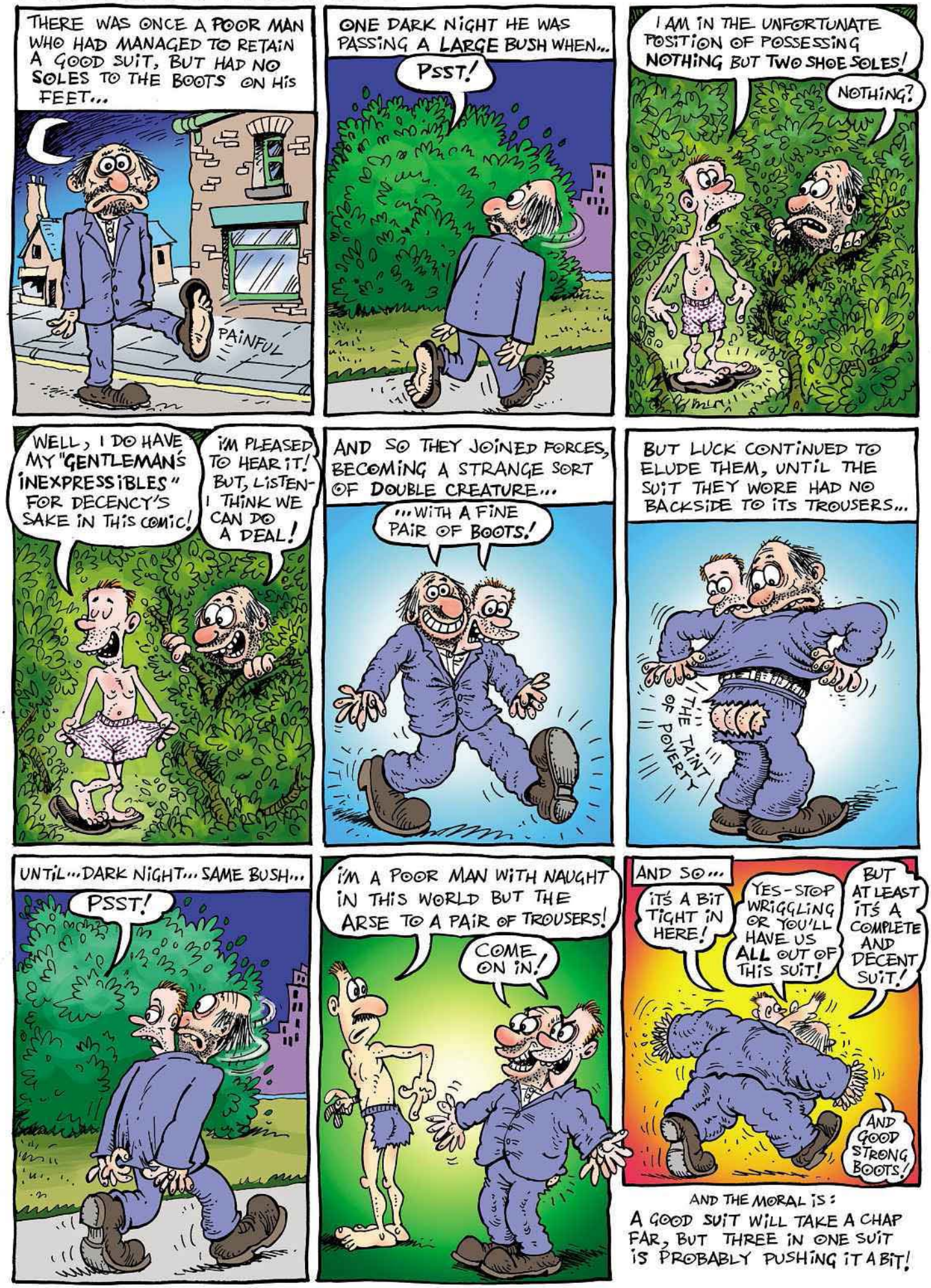
PHENOMENOMIX

HUNT EMERSON


THERE WAS ONCE A POOR MAN WHO HAD MANAGED TO RETAIN A GOOD SUIT, BUT HAD NO SOLES TO THE BOOTS ON HIS FEET...
PAINFUL
ONE DARK NIGHT HE WAS PASSING A LARGE BUSH WHEN...
PSST!
I AM IN THE UNFORTUNATE POSITION OF POSSESSING NOTHING BUT TWO SHOE SOLES!
NOTHING?
WELL, I DO HAVE MY "GENTLEMAN'S INEXPRESSIBLES" FOR DECENCY'S SAKE IN THIS COMIC!
I'M PLEASED TO HEAR IT! BUT, LISTEN- I THINK WE CAN DO A DEAL!
AND SO THEY JOINED FORCES, BECOMING A STRANGE SORT OF DOUBLE CREATURE...
...WITH A FINE PAIR OF BOOTS!
BUT LUCK CONTINUED TO ELUDE THEM, UNTIL THE SUIT THEY WORE HAD NO BACKSIDE TO ITS TROUSERS...
THE TAINT OF POVERTY
UNTIL...DARK NIGHT... SAME BUSH...
PSST!
I'M A POOR MAN WITH NAUGHT IN THIS WORLD BUT THE ARSE TO A PAIR OF TROUSERS!
COME ON IN!
AND SO...
IT'S A BIT TIGHT IN HERE!
YES-STOP WRIGGLING OR YOU'LL HAVE US ALL OUT OF THIS SUIT!
BUT AT LEAST IT'S A COMPLETE AND DECENT SUIT!
AND GOOD STRONG BOOTS!

AND THE MORAL IS:
A GOOD SUIT WILL TAKE A CHAP FAR, BUT THREE IN ONE SUIT IS PROBABLY PUSHING IT A BIT!

COMING NEXT MONTH

PARANORMAL RANGERS

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+

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FORTEAN TIMES 360

ON SALE 9 NOV 2017

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

An Indonesian man called Akbar was reported missing on 27 March in Salubiro village on the island of Sulawesi, after going to harvest palm oil. The next day, police found a sluggish reticulated python, 7m (23ft) long, in a ditch beside the family's palm plantation; nearby was a harvesting tool and a boot. The huge snake was cut open and the 25-year-old man's body found. Reticulated pythons are among the world's longest reptiles and suffocate their victims before swallowing them whole. They rarely kill and eat humans, although there are occasional reports of them swallowing young children or animals. A python of this size would hunt for large prey, such as boars or wild dogs. While they normally avoid human settlements, they would see palm oil plantations as a good hunting ground, as they attract animals like boars, primates or dogs. In 2013, a security guard on the island of Bali was killed by a python at a luxury beachfront hotel. *[AFP] theguardian.com, BBC News, 29 Mar; NY Post, 30+31 Mar 2017.* For a photo of man with his head inside a python's jaws, see FT85:12; and for a photo of an anaconda that had swallowed a man, see FT58:16.

A gay loner inadvertently filmed his own murder during a bondage sex session. Jason Marshall met Peter Fasoli, 58, on a gay dating app and smothered him while Classic FM played in the background. Marshall set fire to the house in a bid to cover his tracks and it was thought Fasoli had died in the fire at his bungalow in Northolt, northwest London, on 7 January 2013. An investigation concluded that the fire was started by a faulty light, which might have fallen onto his bed. Then in November 2014, Fasoli's nephew Christopher Murgatroyd, researching his family's genealogy, examined the hard drive on his uncle's fire-damaged computer and discovered a video recording of the tryst with Marshall, 28, who had posed as a policeman. Fasoli is seen being tied up and begging for his life before being smothered with cling film and a plastic bag. At his Old Bailey trial, Marshall, of Forest Gate, east London, was found guilty of murder. *D.Telegraph, 1+11 Aug; Metro, 1 Aug 2017*.

Passengers on the *Emerald Princess* cruise liner travelling along the Alaskan coastline on 25 July were being entertained by a "Murder Mystery" play during dinner when there was an announcement at 9pm requesting urgent assistance from medical and security teams. Most people assumed it was simply part of the show. However, Kristy Manzanares, 39, had been found in her blood-spattered cabin with a severe head wound and was pronounced dead 20 minutes later. The liner was diverted to Juneau and placed on lock-down for hours as the FBI investigated. Murder charges were eventually filed against the husband, Kenneth Manzanares. The couple, from Santa Clara, Utah, had taken the cruise to celebrate their 18th wedding anniversary, accompanied by their teenage daughters. Mr Manzanares, a former bail bondsman, told an acquaintance that he killed his wife because "she would not stop laughing at me." *New York Daily News, (London) Eve. Standard, 28 July 2017.*

A pregnant Minnesota teenager was charged with second-degree manslaughter after shooting her boyfriend dead on 26 June in a failed stunt they hoped would make them famous on YouTube. With two camera positioned to catch their antics, and with their three-year-old son in the room, Monalisa Perez, 19, shot 22-year-old Pedro Ruiz III in the chest from a foot away, while he held a hardcover encyclopædia as a shield. He died at the scene in Halstad, Minneapolis, watched by nearly 30 neighbours. Around half an hour before the stunt, Perez tweeted: "Me and Pedro are probably going to shoot one of the most dangerous videos ever," with two nervous-looking emojis. She added: "HIS idea not MINE," accompanied by an image of a monkey covering its eyes. The weapon was a Desert Eagle .50 calibre pistol, described in online ads as "one of the world's most powerful semi-automatic handguns". Perez faced up to 10 years behind bars. *Eve. Standard, 29 June; (Sydney) D.Telegraph, (London) D.Telegraph, 30 June 2017*.

Rocío Cortés Núñez, 25, had just given birth by cæsarian section in Seville's Our Lady of Valme hospital on 20 August when a porter was moving her to a maternity ward on a hospital trolley. The doors on the lift they were in opened and closed a few times. As the porter attempted to wheel her out of the lift to try another one, it began to rise, leaving part of her body hanging outside. She was decapitated. She had two other children, aged four and five, and her newborn daughter Triana – who was with her at the time – was not harmed. *BBC News, 21 Aug 2017.*

Could You Be A Writer?

The Writers Bureau's Writer of the Year 2017 Sarah Plater

Marian Ashcroft talks with Susie Busby, Principal of The Writers Bureau, Britain's largest independent writing school, about what it takes to be a writer.

Who do you think can be a writer then, Susie?
Well, a writer is someone who communicates ideas through words. And most of us do that every day via social media … so we're all writers to some degree.

But can you really say someone is a writer if they text and tweet?
Not really. I suppose when we talk about a 'writer' we usually mean someone who's earning from their writing. But telling stories to friends online is writing too. And even there, you come across people who craft their sentences and play with words, which is a good indication that writing is their thing.

So, do you need to be a 'special' person to study with The Writers Bureau?
Not at all! WB has been going for 28 years now, and though some people come to us with very clear objectives, others have little more than a vague desire to do something creative. Our students come from all sorts of backgrounds, and all sorts of cultures – leafy home-counties villages, bustling African cities, and everywhere else between. The majority haven't really written much before, so we give them skills, and a safe space to explore their options, then prepare them for approaches to the editors, agents and producers who'll eventually push their work out into the world.

But you must be looking for something …
Determination. Apart from a reasonable level of written English, that's all we're after.

Not talent?
Well, that helps. But talent's no good if you won't put the hours in. It's the same in all the creative industries. Like Mo Farah said back in 2012 – 'Anything's possible, it's just hard work and grafting.' And in our experience, grafting beats pure talent every time.

Okay, but if someone already has that 'grafting' spirit, where does The Writers Bureau fit in?
Well, to stick with sporting analogies, for any student ready to go for it, Writers Bureau is the coach in the background. Our courses and tutors build a new writer's confidence and help them find out what they're good at. We then show them how to get pieces ready for submission, so they've got the best possible chance of turning whatever talent they may have into proper, paid work.

Is that what happened with this year's Writer of the Year – Sarah Plater?
Exactly. When Sarah first joined us she wanted to write novels (still does). But on her course she discovered a talent for non-fiction. She's now onto her fourth non-fiction book, earns half her income from writing, and runs a writing business with her husband – Mr and Ms Creative. We're so proud of her. She's worked hard and run with opportunities as they've arisen, which just goes to show what a little confidence and determination can actually do.

Any final words of advice for aspiring writers?
Apart from taking one of our courses, you mean? No seriously, I believe a writer must do three things. Firstly, read lots, and widely. Next, write as much as possible – ideally every day. And finally, learn to edit. Anyone who can do these three things is well on the way to producing great work.

If you'd like to find out more about The Writers Bureau, take a look at their website: www.writersbureau.com or call their freephone number 0800 856 2008. Please quote AT1117

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